BACKPACKINGLIGHT

The Magazine of Lightweight Hiking and Backcountry Travel

ISSUE 11

$9.95 US $12.95 CAN

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Ready, Willing & Able: NOLS Goes Lightweight

Backpacking Light Reviews the SPOT

Tropical Ultra-Light in Hawaii

Slickrock: A Canyoneering Photo Essay

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Pilot Peak, Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains.
Photo by Ryan Jordan

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COVER: Our two-night stay at Kalalau Beach comes to an end, and Agnes leads the charge back to the surf town of Hanalei Bay.

THIS PAGE: Canyoneering is the opposite of mountain climbing. Rather than striving for the highest point to look down, you are in the bottom of a canyon with the world above you. At this point near the end of Buckskin Gulch (one of the more famous slot canyons in Utah), the walls of the canyon extend almost 500 feet above you.

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OUR MISSION

Backpacking Light promotes multi-day, self-sufficient ("backpackable"), backcountry travel in lightweight style.

Backpacking Light Magazine (ISSN 1550-4417), the quarterly print magazine of Backpacking Light (http://www.backpackinglight.com), is published by Beartooth Media Group, Inc., 1627 West Main Street, Suite No. 310, Bozeman MT 59715. Copyright © 2008 by Beartooth Media Group, Inc. Backpacking Light and its logo are registered trademarks of Beartooth Media Group, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be reproduced without permission of the publisher. Printed in China.

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ADVERTISING
Advertising sales inquiries to ads@backpackinglight.com. Newsstands: Backpacking Light Magazine is distributed by Ingram Periodicals. Postmaster: send address changes to Backpacking Light Magazine, 1627 West Main Street, Suite No. 310, Bozeman MT 59715.

EDITORIAL
Please direct editorial inquiries to submissions@backpackinglight.com. Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited material.

Published in the USA. Printed in Hong Kong.
This magazine uses 50% post-consumer paper.

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Publisher's Message

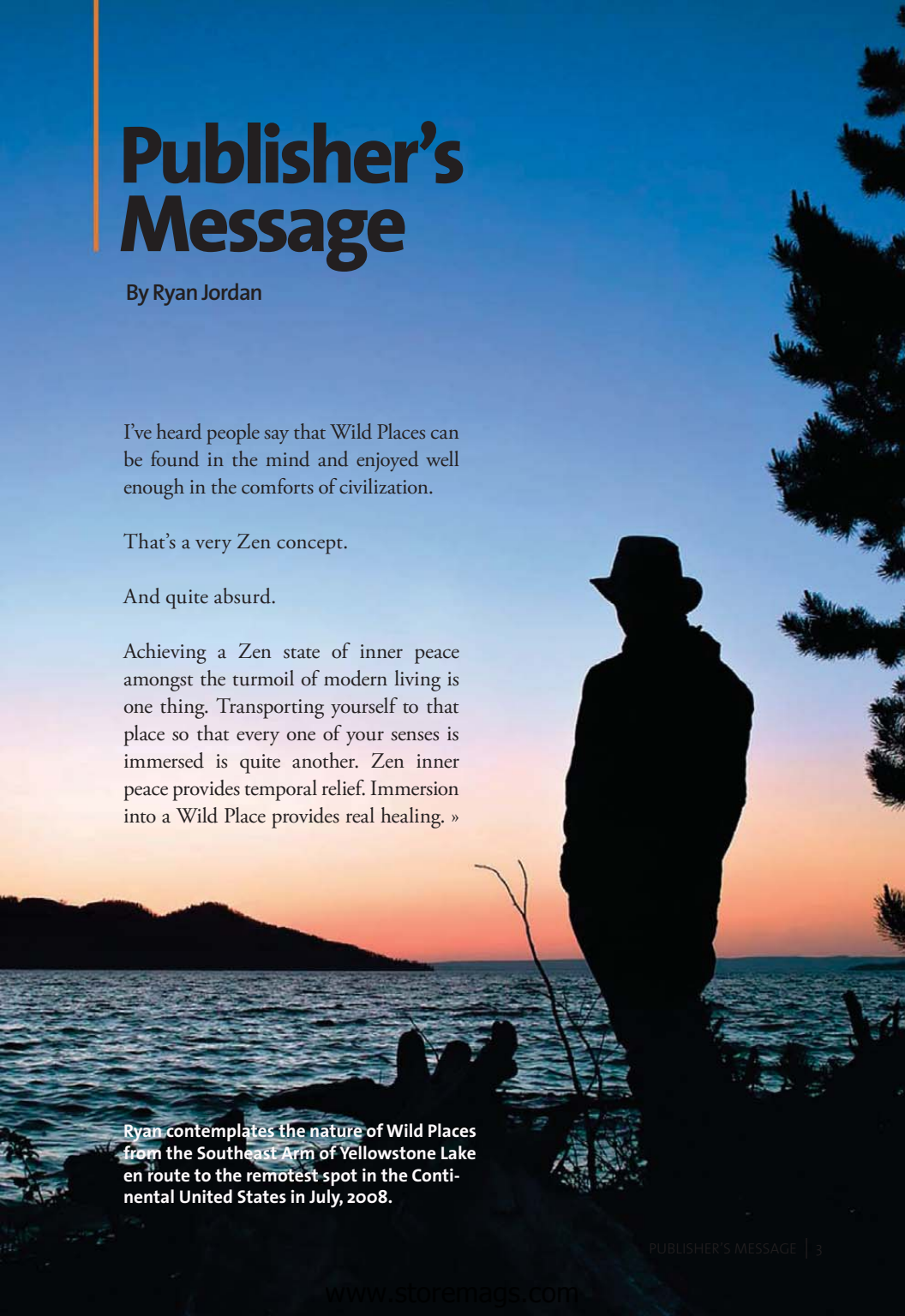
By Ryan Jordan

I've heard people say that Wild Places can be found in the mind and enjoyed well enough in the comforts of civilization.

That's a very Zen concept.

And quite absurd.

Achieving a Zen state of inner peace amongst the turmoil of modern living is one thing. Transporting yourself to that place so that every one of your senses is immersed is quite another. Zen inner peace provides temporal relief. Immersion into a Wild Place provides real healing. »



Ryan contemplates the nature of Wild Places from the Southeast Arm of Yellowstone Lake en route to the remotest spot in the Continental United States in July, 2008.

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I left the grid for ten days this July to enjoy a slow walk through the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It took a few days of being immersed in that Wild Place to even understand what my senses were and to realize the benefits of the (slow) process of their sensitization to Wild Things.

The sensitization process went quickly for me this time. And I have a motorized boat to thank for it.

Our party left the Bridge Bay Marina on Yellowstone Lake's north shore in a twin-engine, 300hp charter that ferried our packs and bodies across the lake in an hour-long boat ride to the lake's Southeast Arm. We experience the roar of the engines, the smell of the motor oil, the coolness of the aluminum hull, and the violent bouncing through the waves – such things that reflect the very antithesis of a Wild Place.

Because we were the first permitted party into that section of Yellowstone this year, we were excited to achieve solitude rapidly, so we wasted no time unloading our packs, walking ashore, and waving goodbye to the boat captains. They promptly threw the engines in reverse, sped away, and before they became a speck on the horizon, we realized we were surrounded by dramatic quiet and solitude, interrupted only by the gentle lapping of waves on the lake shore. The scene had almost immediately been transformed from a motorized locale into a Wild Place.

This transformation does not come easy in the context of living amongst a modern society. Unless we close our eyes (to block things man-made), plug our ears (to block the sounds of those things), and pinch our nostrils (to block the smells of those things), we cannot even come close to a Wild Place. You see, being physically present in a Wild Place demands that our senses be opened. All of those things that overwhelm the senses while living in a civilized place must be overwhelmed by the reality of being in a Wild Place, in order for immersion to happen fully.

And with immersion into a (real and physical) Wild Place, comes tangible benefits: rest for the body, salve for the mind, and glitter for the soul.

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Contributors

Nicole Chilton lives in Bozeman, Montana and works for Backpacking Light. Prior to finding her way to the Big Sky State, she lived in Eugene, Oregon and was a raft guide during her college days. Living in Bozeman gives her the advantage of nearby skiing in the winter and easy-to-find hikes in the summer.

Alan Dixon is an engineer and co-founder of Backpacking Light. A native Californian, he carried his own backpack out of Yosemite Valley at age four. Since then, Alan has climbed and backpacked over much of the United States and around the world. He has also guided trips and organized seminars on lightweight backpacking, climbing, and canyoneering. He and his wife, Alison Simon, live on the East Coast.

Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi grew up in New Hampshire, where he spent his youth playing in the woods and mountains of New England. He has worked at various outdoor programs for sixteen years. After graduating from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in Kinesiology with a concentration in Outdoor Education, he headed west to work for the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) where he is a senior field instructor in climbing, hiking, mountaineering, backcountry skiing, and snowboarding and the special projects manager for the Southwest location. Ryan currently splits his time between the Rockies and the Southwest, training NOLS staff in the art of lightweight backpacking.

Roger Caffin started bushwalking at fourteen and took up rock climbing at University with the girl who became his wife and permanent walking partner. Ski touring and canyoneering followed. Winter and summer, they prefer long hard trips with one another for company, going fast and light in unfrequented trackless country. Given their druthers, they would be out walking, skiing, or snowshoeing for at least three months a

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year. Their move to lightweight gear, much to their backs' relief, has been facilitated by the fact that Roger designs and makes much of the gear himself. He is also an Editor at www.BackpackGearTest.org, the maintainer of the Australian Bushwalking FAQ web site (www.bushwalking.org.au/FAQ), and the magazine Editor and Web Master for the Confederation of Bushwalking Clubs NSW (in Australia).

Chris Eastwood was born in 1964 in what was a small town on the coast of South East Queensland, Australia. Living with thousands of square miles of tropical rainforest on his doorstep, it didn't take him long to go backpacking through there. Back in the 1970s there was very little lightweight gear (with most being ex-army) and even less that was suitable to the environment, being made for North American or European conditions. Chris fairly quickly started to customize or make his own gear, which perhaps led him to better understanding the need to select the right gear for locations.

Matt Hage works as a magazine and commercial photographer based in Anchorage, Alaska. Growing up in Fairbanks has given him a soft spot for forty-below. He is the veteran of a half-dozen Denali expeditions and has produced a photography book documenting the people and places along the Yukon River.

Brandon Wilson is an expert light trekker and member of the prestigious Explorers Club who has walked the 2,620-mile Templar trail from France to Jerusalem, the Camino de Santiago and Via de la Plata across Spain and Norway's St. Olav's Way. He and his wife were the first Western couple to trek the 1,000-kilometer trail from Lhasa to Kathmandu, and he was the first American to trek the Via Francigena from England to Rome. Wilson is the award-winning author/photographer of *Yak Butter Blues* and *Dead Men Don't Leave Tips: Adventures X Africa*. His book, *Along the Templar Trail*, with maps, gear lists, distances/stages and photos from this Templar Trail trek was recently published and is available your favorite bookstore, Internet booksellers, or pilgrimstales.com.

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Forum Echoes

Editor's Note: At Backpacking Light, reader feedback and input is a huge part of what we do. We've picked a few posts that got our readers talking and reprinted them here. To join the discussion or to read more about what readers had to say about these subjects, visit the Forums section at backpackinglight.com/forums.
- Nicole Chilton

On Slugs:

OK, so here I am at the beginning of my UL career, standing in the backyard pitching tarps, hanging hammocks, sleeping with or w/o groundsheet, with or w/o bug net just trying to generate both experience and questions. So last night I throw down a sleeping pad under my newly-pitched tarp. Sleeping is fine, but the morning brings an underside (of pad) full of little slugs and their slime trails. I scraped the little buggers off, leaving the pad looking like some Harry Potter troll sneezed on it.

So I'm thinking to myself: What do my new BPL friends have to say about all this? It's not a crisis, and maybe the philosophy is "I don't care 'bout no stinkin' slugs." But, it certainly strikes me as unpleasant carrying around a snotty sleeping pad. Do I just suck it up and embrace my inner slug? Or simply consider that ground sleeping in dampish environments is not the best choice?

Any practical or philosophical wisdom is welcome.

Tom Kight,
June 14, 2008

Reply to "On Slugs":

Tom,

A true UL backpacker would have picked the slugs off the sleeping pad and cooked them in their morning oats. Protein can be heavy.

Mark Henley,
June 14, 2008

On Picking a Pack & Down Jacket:

Granite Gear Vapor Trail is a lot of pack. I use the Virga (structureless cousin), and it is a great pack. I would think you would do well with the Vapor Trail.

For a jacket, I cannot say enough about the Montbell UL Down Inner. She is one amazing jacket. It is under 7 oz on my scale (medium), and it performs like a champ.

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It is the only piece of light weight gear that I have purchased that has not been replaced.

One warning: don't drink [Bacardi] 151 with it around a crackling campfire. The smallest sparks will burn through it in a flash...you need your reflexes to brush off the sparks. If you are going to be in temps that are 15 to 60 degrees, this [jacket], with a shell+fleece or cap+fleece and gloves should be all you need. If you think you will need to hike in it (my guess hiking under 30 degree temps), then I would get the thermal wrap to handle the moisture.

Jamie Shortt,
June 11, 2008

On Diminishing Returns:

As with most things in life, you get diminished returns as you approach the extreme. Most of us here will agree that it is extremely enticing and easy to fall into the trap of "the lighter the better."

But step back a bit and think: what is YOUR purpose for lightening up? Is it to enjoy your hikes more? Or are you in a race against others (or yourself) to see who can hike the lightest and come back alive to brag about it?

If enjoying the hike is your goal, we all have a personal "sweet spot" where the load is light enough that we can hike on without even thinking about it. Spending ever more time and expense going below that will give you ever-diminishing physiological returns.

My own sweet spot is around 20 lbs total pack weight. I can hike all day and not even think about the weight. Sure, lighter still is "better" - but the point is it won't really be all that much better for me. On the other hand, not having a proper sleeping bag or pad or shelter will certainly be a damper.

I think you should first determine for yourself where your sweet spot lies - before jumping in with both feet in some quest for the lightest - only to find out later that the benefits fail to outweigh the negatives (in terms of sacrificing safety or convenience or just plain fun).

Plenty of people get caught up into drilling holes in the handles of their spoons or leaving the toothbrush entirely at home. Now, each to his or her own, and why deny anyone the fun and benefits of going super duper ultra light? But recognize that the benefits here are purely psychic (if not psycho). On the other hand, if that's what tickles you, then by all means - have a go at it and enjoy. But just make sure you know what you want before you start your gear weight shedding quest.

Benjamin Tang,
June 12, 2008

On Platypus Bag Design:

[A previous poster] asked: "but what's up with the new design on the hydration reservoirs? The part where the drink tube attaches is not at the bottom of the bag - does this make sense? Also, it seems that the funky big zip design adds unnecessary weight. I'm happy with my older Platypus bag"

I think it's pretty fair

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pad and cooked them in their morning oats. Protein can be heavy.

to say that it's a direct rip off of the Source Widepac design, which has been around for four or five years now. These aren't perfect. The tube coming off the side wall is a pain in the bot bot and makes it hard to drain the bag completely, and I still love the Platy Duck Lips. The extra weight of the closure is a no brainer however, and the main reason I haven't bought a Platy for three years.

It allows a FULL opening, rather than the 5/6 that Platy Big Zip gives, with no ridges to trap grunge. It seals fast AND secure. Try sealing a Big Zip with cold wet hands when the temp is around freezing or when it's 40 °C (102 °F) in the desert, with the sand blowing.

The only downside is that I have to let my teammates fill their Platys first when we're racing, since I know it will take them longer to Zip up, especially if they're adding powder.

This is an extra ounce that pays its own way.

Rod Lawlor, June 16, 2008

On a Personal Journey:

I just want to say that my experience with this site and forum has been wonderful, and I am grateful to all of you for sharing so much know-how and experience in a positive atmosphere.

I just signed on as a member - mainly to take advantage of discounts on gear that I can't get elsewhere. But I am also looking forward to perusing all the articles I couldn't read before.

I first heard of lightweight backpacking just 10 months ago when I visited REI in the States for the first time in years and was *shocked* at packs that weighed "just" 2.5 pounds. Back in Ukraine, I began reading online and gradually got the drift of things. I made a bunch of purchases early on that were decent, but not truly ultralight. Then, in February, I visited the U.S. again and had a TON of gear mailed for pick up. I got "Beyond Backpacking" and read it three times to try to let as much as possible sink in.

Back in Ukraine, I started taking a bunch of solo hikes and increasing the mileage and dropping weight. I've gotten down to 7 lbs so far and am now thinking about 1 and 2 lbs for summer hikes in balmy Crimea.

Now I'm heading to Colorado shortly to do my first long-distance hike -- a yo-yo through the Colorado Rockies. It's always been my dream to experience the Rockies close-up, and now I can do it. All my reading and efforts to gain real-life experience have made this possible.

To this day I have not yet seen another ultralight backpacker in real life. In January I launched a website in Russian for the hitherto nonexistent UL community in the Russian speaking world, and it has garnered a lot of interest. I want to give back some of what I have learned and find new friends and contacts at the same time.

Anyways, I just wanted to say thanks to this

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community and to the folks who created it.

On the Contrail:

I live in the Mojave Desert and find the TarpTent Contrail a great tent with lots of room for one plus gear (or a dog) and excellent ventilation.

The Contrail is fast to pitch and great shelter in a downpour or an all day drizzle. ONE CAVEAT: take a light plastic floor-shaped ground cloth when camping with a TarpTent on sandy ground. Don't ask me how I know.

Tarps usually require trees or several poles to erect and take more time than most tents to set up.

A bivy and a tarp is a heavy combo. A tarp and a mosquito net are not as good as a TarpTent.

The only problem that a double wall tent will partially solve is a dust storm because of the fly and wall coverage. How many times will you be in a dust storm? In a true, full on Sirocco or sandstorm, nothing short of a vehicle will keep out the sand.

P.S. I almost forgot: TarpTents are great at keeping out the creepy crawlies like scorpions, spiders, and snakes - OH MY!

Eric Blumensaadt, June 11, 2008

On Trail Days in Damascus:

The Damascus, VA Trail Days was last weekend. It is timed to hit the majority of AT thru-hikers, although many of them hitch (yellow blaze) north or south to participate in the festivities. It was a great time to meet lots of friendly people and see some of the leading UL equipment. There was too much for me to take in and remember, so I hope there are other BPL members or gear suppliers that can fill in the bits I missed. I encourage anyone on the east coast to experience it next year if you haven't done it before.

Thomas Clark, May 19, 2008

Read more at backpackinglight.com/forums

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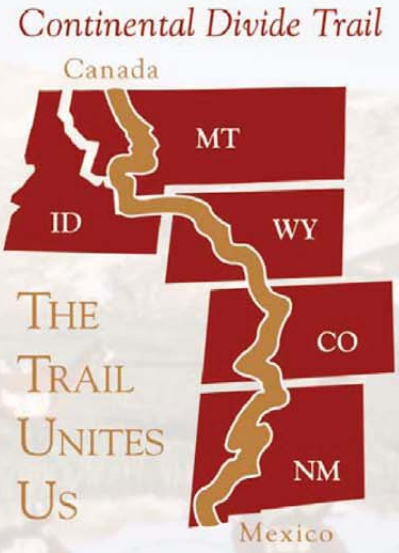

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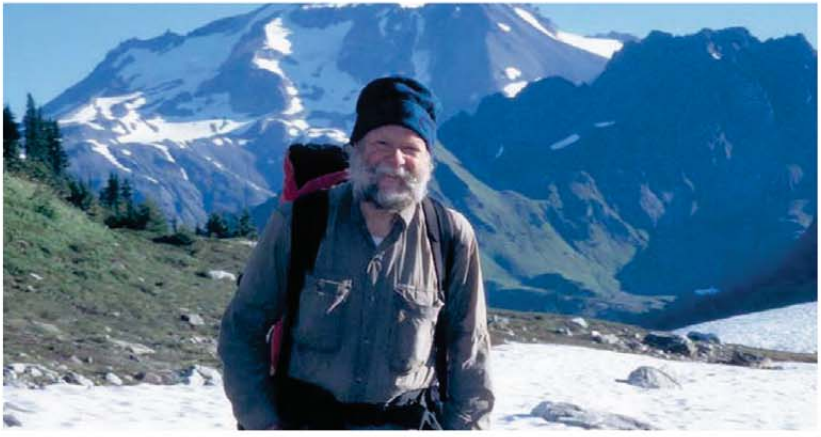
Ron Moak

Faces is an ongoing column featuring leaders in the lightweight backpacking industry.



Ron Moak isn't new to lightweight backpacking. When he and his wife Linda first hiked the Appalachian Trail (AT) in 1977, they carried packs that weighed only thirty-five pounds, including ten days' worth of food. At the time, such a low pack weight was practically unheard of, but the young couple just didn't see the logic in carrying heavy packs that turned an otherwise enjoyable experience in the backcountry into a spine-jarring schlep through the woods. Because there weren't a lot of gear stores around when they first began hiking, let alone lightweight gear in the existing stores, Ron found himself making or altering his gear in order to have what he wanted. This sort of self-reliance and creativity stuck with him, carrying him through the years and the trails until finally, in 2002, he started his own lightweight gear company, Six Moon Designs.

Ron's first backpacking experience was a short hike on the AT with two friends while he was still in high school. "It was kind of a really bizarre coming of age trip in a lot of ways," said Ron. "There was an older gentleman who had spent a lot of time backpacking, and he invited a friend and I out before school started. He had this broken down old car and we had to drive up this little narrow mountain dirt road. On the way back, he hit a rock and split his oil pan, so we were stuck. I ended up hitch-hiking a hundred miles to a town to catch a bus," Ron remembered fondly.

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The hike was only five miles in and five miles back, and though it was an awkward introduction to backpacking, it was still enough to get Ron hooked.

The next time Ron would be back to the AT would be with his wife, Linda. Their plan was to thru-hike the trail southbound starting on June 13, 1977. Prior to this trek, the longest hike they had ever completed was just sixty miles, so planning for the entire AT quickly became an educational experience. Ron turned to books about the Trail for information, maps, and tips about how to successfully complete it. They read up on thru-hikers who had walked the Trail using new lightweight or minimalist techniques. Ron was fascinated with thru-hikers like Emma "Grandma" Gatewood and how she not only carried very little, but made or improvised almost all of her own gear. "She was one of the first," says Ron. "She and others, like Ray Jardine and Dorothy Laker, really inspired me."

The lack of gear stores available in the late 1970s also spurred them along in their need to make their own gear. Ron turned to catalogs to see what was available and used that gear as a model, not as a precedent, for what they would need. The lack of guidance from a salesperson left Ron to include only the basics, then begin subtracting the weight from there. They kept their clothing minimal, downsized their maps, and cut out the items that they could either improvise or do without, but more than anything, they simply avoided the extras. "You buy the basics and then buy a whole lot of stuff on top of that, and you can still keep a pretty light pack," said Ron. "But when you start carrying espresso machines and all that other stuff, it gets heavy pretty quick." With their light packs, Ron and Linda were able to make good time. On October 22, 1977, after just 132 days, they completed the Trail at its terminus in Georgia.

Ron was fascinated with thru-hikers like Emma "Grandma" Gatewood and how she not only carried very little, but made or improvised almost all of her own gear.

After completing the AT, Ron and Linda had planned to hike the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) as well. Ron had decided to go for the Triple Crown, which includes the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Continental Divide Trails. However, instead of heading out on that journey, they made the decision to move to the West Coast so that Ron could finish school. After getting off the AT, they spent a month renovating an old school bus for their drive out west. They took

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out the seats, added some basic furnishings, and after driving 3,000 miles across the United States to arrive in Corvallis, Oregon, they used the bus as their home until they were able to get an apartment a month later.

The thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail would be years away. Ron began classes at Oregon State University while Linda took on a full-time job. Hiking wasn't completely off the table, and while Ron was studying forest management, he began volunteering with Corvallis Mountain Rescue. Since he was still in college and money was scarce, he made his own gear with fabric purchased from a store that specialized in performance fabrics that had just opened in Corvallis. The shop, Rainshed Inc., was one of the first in the country where one could find performance fabrics meant for outdoor sports. The ability to make his gear was both a money-saving endeavor as well as a way to create the lightweight gear that he wanted.

After college Ron went into computer software design, and while the work was good, it wasn't Ron's passion. "It's a great industry, but it's one of those where you have to reinvent yourself every six months," said Ron. In 1995 Ron was diagnosed with cancer and spent three months undergoing chemotherapy. "It gave me a wake up call," he said. "Life's too short to give up all of one's dreams." After Ron had made a full recovery, he and Linda and their son, Brandon, decided to go for a 700-mile section hike of the Appalachian Trail. For Ron and Linda, it was a twenty-year anniversary of their first hike of the AT. For Brandon, who was only thirteen years old at the time, the hike was his first introduction to the AT. Both Ron and Linda kept diaries of their hikes, eventually posting them to their website, fallingwater.com. Their trail journals were among the first to ever be published on the internet and are still available today.

By 2000, Ron was once again in pursuit of the Triple Crown. For the Pacific Crest Trail, he left from the Mexico/U.S. border in April. Ron made most of his gear, including a tarp tent and the first pack he would use on the trail. He started out alone, though Brandon eventually joined him for 1,200 miles of the 2,000 mile trip.

It was a long hike that was difficult at times, but when it was over Ron had an idea for a new life for himself. When he returned to Oregon, he began laying the ground work for a lightweight gear company, and in

The ability to make his gear was both a money-saving endeavor as well as a way to create the lightweight gear that he wanted.

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Six Moon Designs
Lunar Solo
23 Ounce Tent

2002 he launched Six Moon Designs. The name, inspired by the length of time it takes to complete a long thru-hike, reflected Ron's own history and ambitions. However, he wasn't entirely certain where the company would go. "You never know what you're getting yourself into," said Ron, "but you start the ball rolling and hope you can hold on." Their first product, the Europa tent, was "a massive under-seller," according to Ron. Their second product, a lightweight backpack, went the way of the tent and became an underwhelming success. Ron kept trying. "A friend of mine told me to make sure the first two products you have are disasters. And if you still want to keep going after that, then you probably have a chance of competing," said Ron.

Today, Brandon works alongside Ron in their Portland, Oregon based office. Their products include a variety of lightweight tents and backpacks, all of which are designed and produced in the United States. They've evolved over the years, working to change their designs based on the feedback from consumers. The core of Ron's company, which is also his lightweight philosophy, has remained true. "Gear should be like oil in a car. It should lubricate the experience," said Ron. "If you're grinding away, you're going to be miserable, so you need something in there to smooth things out. To me that's what gear is for. Whether it's your clothes or your stuff for camp at night, it's the stuff that lets you flow through the wilderness as easily as possible and still have fun."

Ron is still in pursuit of the Triple Crown and is working on finishing the Continental Divide Trail. To date, he is a little over halfway through, hiking it in sections until it is completed. For more information on Ron and Six Moon Designs, visit sixmoondesigns.com. For Ron's trail journals, visit fallingwater.com.

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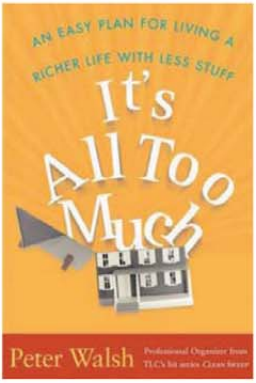
Book Review By Nicole Chilton

It's All Too Much

By Peter Walsh



On the first page of Peter Walsh's how-to book, *It's All Too Much: An Easy Plan for Living a Richer Life with Less Stuff*, he sums up the theme and reason for the book in a single quote from the movie Fight Club: "The things you own end up owning you." The book that follows presents a clear process of how to reclaim the space in your home and life from clutter.

Faced with the daunting task of getting rid of or organizing all the accumulation in the closets and boxes of life, many folks throw in the towel before they even begin. Walsh first tries to establish the relationships people have with their stuff. The emotional attachment to an item and the feeling of need despite lack of use are taken into account before any real organization takes place. Walsh recognizes the emotions behind saving things and presents an approach that begins gently and respectfully, then morphs into a full-blown charge of reclamation of space.

"The things you own end up owning you."

Walsh doesn't force people to give up prized possessions that haven't been touched in decades (literally). Instead, he works to get the reader to let go progressively and willingly, first trash, then unused items, then finally the pieces that have emotional value but no function, such as old prom dresses and baby clothes.

Walsh also emphasizes that purging the home should be a family event with full participation, and not even the family pet is spared. Kids donate things they don't need while learning to respect what they have by putting their belongings away and keeping their rooms clean and tidy. Like family members, every room in the house is addressed separately.

While the concept of lightening the load of items in one's life is intriguing and appealing, the tone of the book comes across as the new fad or cure. Walsh even goes so far as to say, "They did it, and so can you!" At times it feels as if the book is the written equivalent of an infomercial, promising better lives, fulfilled dreams, more productivity, clarity, success, better relationships, etc., but the message is spot on. Wielding a label maker is not the answer; knowing how to approach, handle, and let go of unnecessary stuff is a good start.

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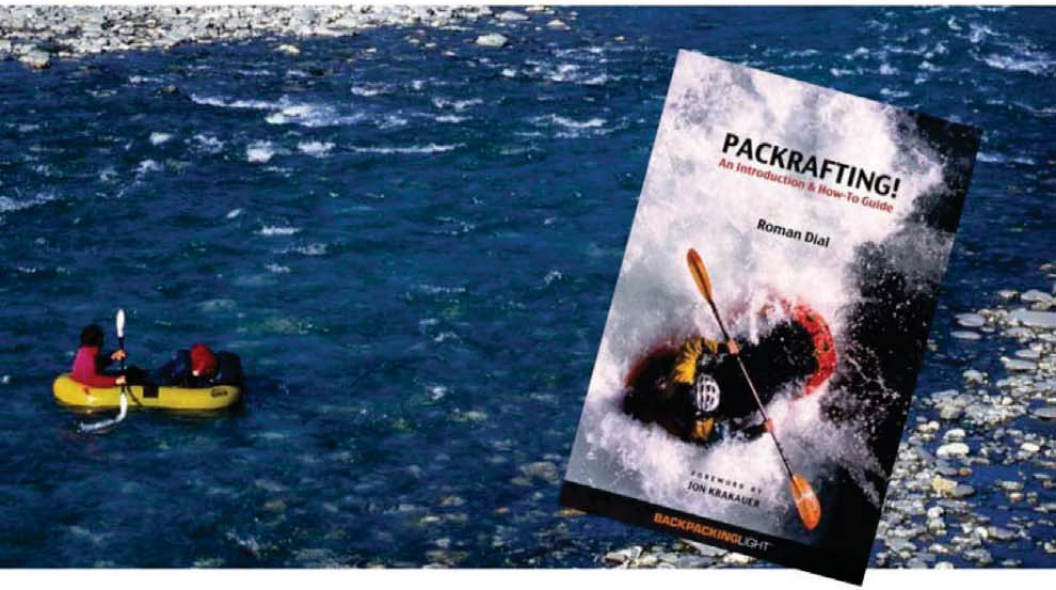

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– Brad Meiklejohn,
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Students (left to right) Zah Yocum, Merryl Pohl, Claire Gray and Josh Varnell show off their lightweight packs after bushwhacking up Horse Canyon, Galiuro Mountains, Arizona. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

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Ready, Willing & Able

How the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) has embraced lightweight backpacking... and how that's changing the school and the lightweight community.

By Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi & Scott Christy

Over a year ago, BackpackingLight.com published the podcast "Is National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) Ready to Go Light?[1]". The podcast and subsequent online discussion provided examples of how NOLS had entered into lightweight backpacking education by running a 'Light and Fast' course, how future courses could be planned, and how the school perceived applying lightweight techniques and skills to a traditional thirty-day NOLS course. Overall, the staff training in which Backpacking Light staff participated in 2007 was characterized by idea sharing and open discussion. Since then, NOLS has continued to refine its lightweight program with great success.

NOLS currently offers lightweight courses at two locations: NOLS Rocky Mountain in Lander, Wyoming operates courses in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem while NOLS Southwest in Tucson, Arizona operates courses in the sky island mountain ranges of southern Arizona and New Mexico. In another move towards embracing the spirit and ethos of lightweight travel, over the last two years NOLS Rocky Mountain has been working on an initiative to lower pack weights to forty pounds or less on all thirty-day Wilderness courses leaving for the field. Historically, NOLS students have left the trailhead with packs weighing around sixty pounds. Due to its location and climate, NOLS Southwest has seen pack weights close to forty pounds for years and is now looking at adapting some semester hiking sections to encompass lightweight

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techniques. As a school, we have run five lightweight staff training courses, with the most recent in May 2008 in the Rockies.

These lightweight courses, training, and initiatives have created a vibrant dialogue, which we hope will continue to provide us with new techniques and methodology. At this point, lightweight philosophy has a strong enough foothold at NOLS that the lines between lightweight and standard courses continue to blur. We are learning that many of these techniques *are* applicable on a "standard" NOLS course (if there is such a thing).

BACKCOUNTRY COOKING

NOLS instructors are often asked how NOLS and lightweight backpacking will mesh. Much of the online discussion has been an exploration of what might work and what may not. Non NOLSies (NOLSies: folks at NOLS) often have questions about food and why it is so important on a course. It is much more interesting to ask what foods of the lightweight variety will work at NOLS, and what is inconsistent with NOLS dining culture. We have had great success by changing some of our staple starches to versions that cook faster or re-hydrate in hot water, as well as simply considering taking foods with a greater calorie to weight ratio. The food that has seemed the most far-fetched when discussed with field staff is crushed Pringles, though this one is growing on us as we wrestle with the concept of weight to calorie ratio. Plus, we like Pringles! We believe NOLS instructors just can't fathom eating the same thing over and over in the field. If you are working fifteen to thirty weeks a year in the field, variety becomes the spice of life. Most senior staff members are moving towards organic whole foods, and I think the concept of Pringles was a bit of a shock.

The bigger issue is that we eat so well on NOLS courses (pizzas, calzones, etc.) that when students complete their course, cooking skills are a huge piece of what they take home with them. We are currently unsure how to maintain that emphasis on lightweight courses. Having said that, the students on the lightweight courses this summer thought we ate very well and were excited by the majority of the food and by extra techniques, such as baking muffins. The real question we face as we continue to develop this course type: Because lightweight cooking is inherently simpler, do we need to try and teach advanced backcountry cooking techniques? At this point, we are leaning towards simple dehydrated meals on lightweight courses, while we continue to value the advanced backcountry cooking skills students learn on traditional courses.

Right now, NOLS lightweight courses use simple, easily re-hydrated foods like pastas, couscous, polenta, and rice with sauces inspired by Mike Clelland. More on these dishes can be found in Mike's article "Groovy-Biotic

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Students Merryl Pohl and Josh Varnell chef up some grub using a Caldera Cone. Cooking is a huge part of traditional NOLS courses, and, with a few tweaks, we have made it an enjoyable component of lightweight courses as well. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

Cooking: Quick, Healthy Meals with an Ultralight Cook Kit²." We are working hard to balance flavor, nutrition, and weight, and so far things have worked well. There are a few tweaks that could be made, particularly in ousting an "all oatmeal" breakfast approach and adding in something more savory. More esoteric cooking techniques can be taught on courses as well (students love muffins, but I find that they consume a lot of fuel for the caloric benefit). In the long run, we will strive to have more variety in our lightweight ration and hope that we can invent some new techniques or standards that will keep cooking interesting. Refining systems over time and use is typically one of our organization's strengths.

BACKCOUNTRY SHELTER

Beyond food, the question of shelters comes up frequently as well. Many a NOLS grad remembers hunkering down on a stormy night under a well-pitched Thelma Fly. For years we have fly-camped at NOLS with these four- to six-person behemoths. At one point, we explored having them made of lighter materials, but the construction durability didn't pass muster. What works in

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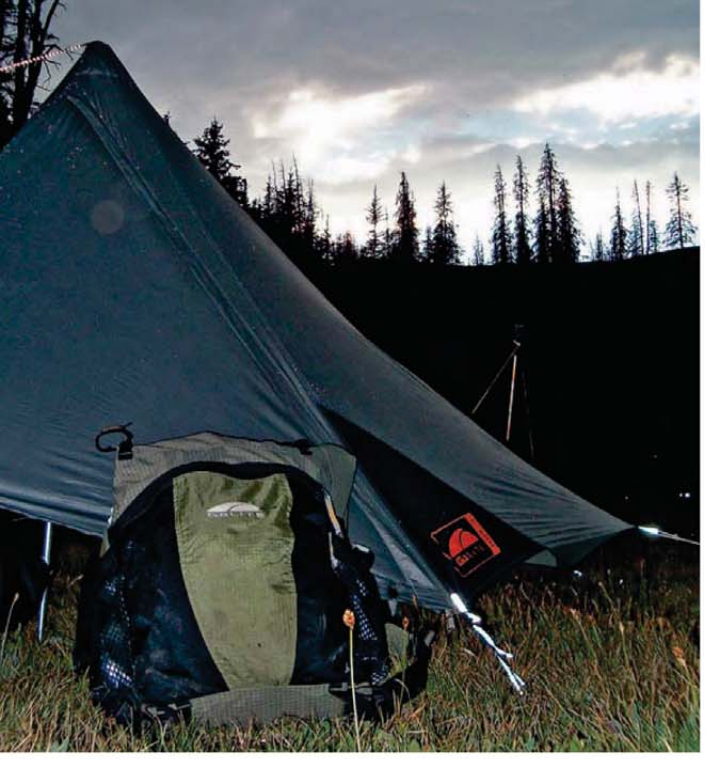

We have used this Golite Hut 1 on two lightweight courses with great success. Two instructors can cram into this 1+ person shelter to save some weight, given the necessity of carrying course paperwork and other institutional materials. Students have been using GoLite Hut 2 or Black Diamond Mega Lite shelters. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

a NOLS course depends on the location and season; for example, Rocky Mountain courses in the summer need to have bug netting due to West Nile virus concerns. We have gotten around this to some degree by scheduling our lightweight Rocky Mountain courses later in the summer (August), when bugs are not as big a concern. In the Southwest, we don't have those concerns, so bug netting is not needed.

Our guidelines can change because we already adapt them to the times and conditions of a particular expedition; however, it is more challenging than just making different decisions on a personal trip. We have a risk management director and parents with specific concerns. We came up with some neat ideas for ways that manufacturers could design and build shelters that would meet our needs and reduce weights significantly on the Southwest training trip last spring. So far we haven't seen these ideas implemented, and unfortunately we are not yet in a position to make them happen on our own. Ultimately, we are moving towards lighter weight shelters already. Black Diamond Mega Lights are replacing Mega Mids; Kivas and Dana Designs Nuk Tuks are generally on their way out, and we are looking for the next best thing that will work. Silnylon shelters in general hold up surprisingly well. The challenge is the less-durable bug netting. In environments without significant bugs, NOLS has a long tradition of using floorless shelters, so that will continue with a few exceptions.

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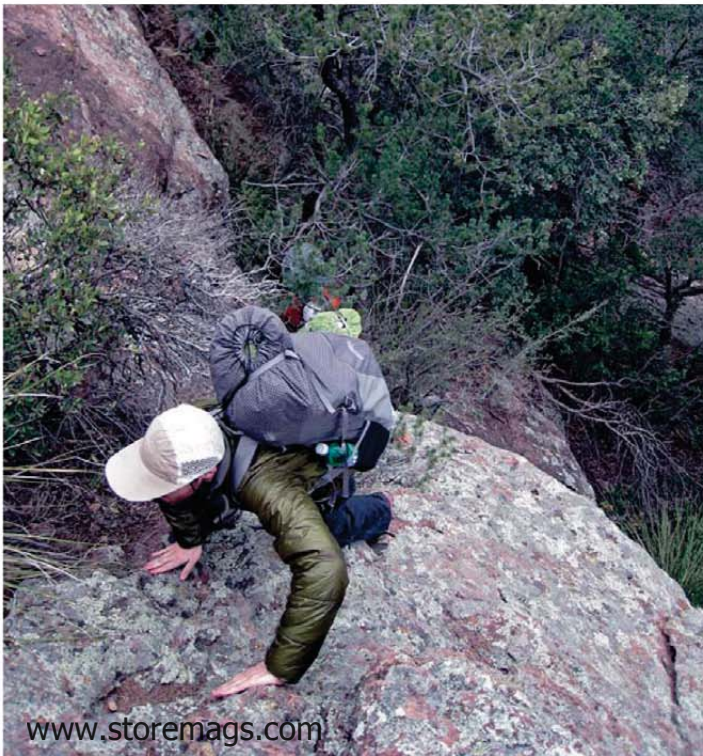
The discussion of lighter weight shelters will quickly raise questions of other gear. There are three broader questions that we see here:

• *What is the lightest gear that will work for NOLS courses?* We think that the materials that we are currently using work well. We may even be able to go lighter. We have had great success with gear from GoLite and MontBell. We watched students in the GoLite Wisp pant scoot down rough granite in the Galiuro Mountains of Arizona, only to get to the ground and bushwhack through cat's claw and manzanita. The pants came out virtually unscathed.

• *What is the lightest weight that will work for standard/traditional month-long courses?* We are not as sure about this yet. We are not yet convinced that the lightweight gear available now has the durability IF it is used in a traditional backpacking set up. This is based on trials from a few instructors in the field this summer who tried to "go less heavy" on traditional courses by mixing traditional group gear with lightweight personal gear. At NOLS Southwest, we have had good results renting lighter gear to students. We are currently renting the MontBell Thermawrap jacket as a mid-layer with excellent results. The 15-denier Ballistic Airlight fabric is remarkably durable, and we have seen little notable loss of loft after three months of almost continuous use. To really de-



NOLS student Zach Yocum enjoys the ability to scramble out of a boulder-choked canyon with his lightweight kit. Galiuro Mountains, Arizona. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

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termine what will work on traditional courses will take time, testing, and surely some failures. One challenge is that when a lightweight piece of gear has a blowout, it is easy to blame it on the fact that the gear is lightweight. In fact, a heavier piece of gear may have seen the same issue; zipper failure is a great example of this.

• *What will be accepted by NOLS?* This is the hardest question. NOLS will work with vendors that are easy to work with, deliver on time, and provide good service. If gear from a company blows out all the time, it won't be accepted. With student-issued personal gear, we need to at least get our purchase price back through rental. So a $100 item, if rented at $30 for thirty days needs to last about 3.3 courses. Will lightweight gear that is currently available do this? We don't think we know yet, though we are learning a lot. The Dyneema gridstop fabric used by GoLite in the Jam2 pack seems plenty durable for what these packs see. Larger packs

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Instructor Scott Christy takes in the views on the 2007 NOLS Southwest Instructor Training trip, Saguaro National Park East, Arizona. This training was held in April, and while it was a successful introduction for staff, it did not push the limits of the gear as much as the 2008 training in February. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

made from this fabric may work as well, though we'd want to test one for a summer to see. GoLite has shared some prototypes of their larger packs with us, and we continue to get them into the field to see how they will hold up. Students do not rent group gear, such as tents or cook sets. So far, lighter shelters have held up to our use. Backpacks have held up well too, though as we go lighter, durability may decrease. We already sell lightweight wind shirts and rain jackets with good results.

PLAYS ROUGH WITH OTHERS

People often wonder why gear gets thrashed on a NOLS course. We don't have a definitive answer, but here are some thoughts:

• Many items are rented; unfortunately, some students (and staff) take better care of things they own than things they rent. We need to do a better job of teaching care for the equipment. Lightweight courses provide an excellent opportunity for this, because if we don't take care of what we have, we quickly do not have what we need to be comfortable.

• Most NOLS students have never been camping before. Ultimately part of the model of experiential education involves students making some small mistakes and learning from them[3]. Students often have no idea what to expect from the gear and come from a culture that encourages us to throw things away and buy new. It is common for them to begin courses with this philosophy.

• We are out there for a LONG time. There is at least one sleeping bag company that warranties their bags holding their rating for a thirty-day life span. For a normal user, that could be anywhere from five to fifteen years. For a NOLS student or instructor, it could be one course. Our gear gets used more: in more varied conditions and by more people than an average user's gear.

• Heavy packs have led to dropping (sometimes literally) packs at any opportunity, creating a lot of internal rubbing

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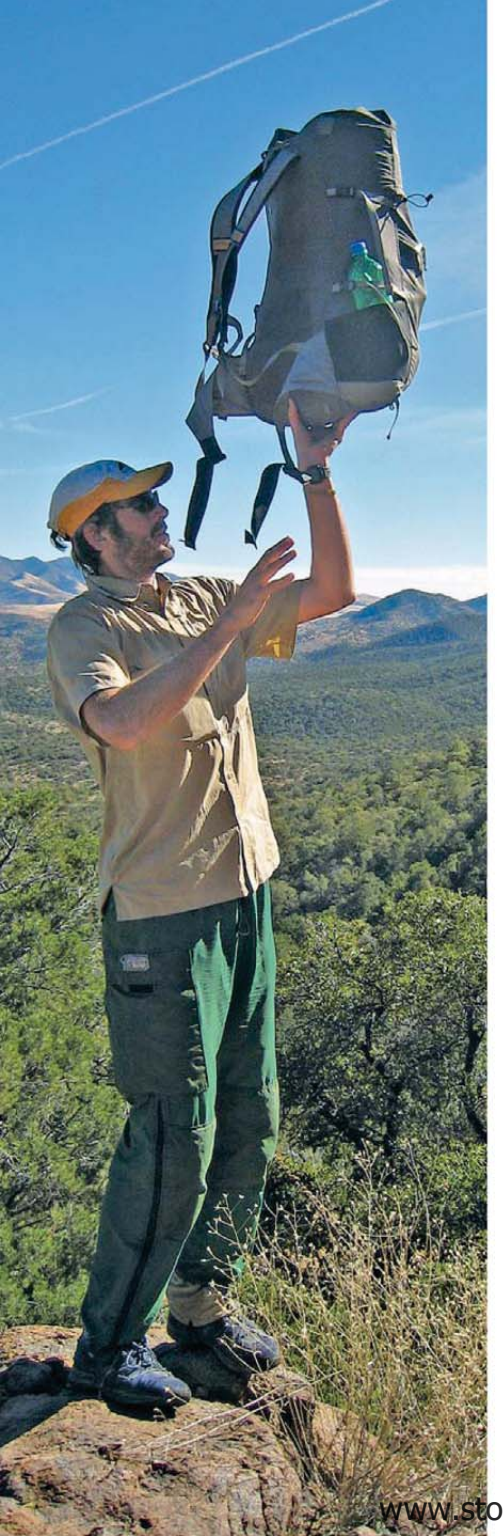

and wear on items inside the pack.

We aren't likely to send students out with silnylon packs, even on lightweight courses. They simply take a level of care that needs to be developed by using gear in the field. At NOLS, we are teaching a foundation of skills for students to take with them. If we teach them well, they will take these skills and tools into their lives after NOLS and further develop them. This applies to the gear they use, the way they care for it, and the leadership skills they learn as well.

One thought is to rent less gear and have students buy more, but it is important to us as an organization that we don't alienate our less-privileged students. Tuition for a course is already a good chunk of change, and it's risky to buy everything when you don't even know if you will like the activity enough to do it in the future.

NOLS'S LIGHTWEIGHT FUTURE

What does all this mean for the school? Will lighter equipment mean we stay out longer, go further each day, or both? We think it will mean that we go further each day and will be able do more on layover/rest days, as well as enabling us to stay out longer. This will be location- and activity-dependent. At the very least it will mean we go more miles per day due to our ability to travel longer on any

Instructor Scott Christy shows just how light it really is at the end of a thirteen-day lightweight course. Galiuro Mountains, Arizona. Photo by Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi.

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given day. We have also found that it means we are able to travel during the day and still have energy to do classes (we are a school after all) or to do some cool exploring, like dropping into a nearby canyon that looks interesting.

Course lengths are determined by much more than pack weight, but there are some neat opportunities for the future of lightweight backpacking at NOLS. People are already talking about thirty-day lightweight courses, unsupported two-week courses, and even longer unsupported courses. We'll see where it goes, but lightweight packing is here to stay. Our expedition-based history provides us with an opportunity to share the lightweight skills and techniques necessary for leading and participating in longer duration expeditions.

It is undeniable that the introduction of lightweight backpacking has had great effect on NOLS as a school. The lightweight courses have brought new students who may not have considered a NOLS education in the past. We are seeing lighter weight gear being used on more traditional courses, along with initiatives to lower pack weights around the school. Instructors are looking closely at how many resources they use to teach in the field, and how they can maintain the high educational outcomes by either reducing and minimizing teaching materials or committing curriculum to memory. This in turn is leading to more interactive and innovative classes.

We are able to teach the important gear choices needed for lightweight courses in the context of situational judgment, enhancing the teaching of judgment and decision-making, core leadership skills at NOLS. By forcing students and staff to look at all the available data - objective weight, climate, and route data at the beginning of a course - we are able to continue to develop decision-making skills reflecting upon our previous choices for the rest of the course. This has returned backpacking at NOLS to a skills-type course, instead of a "one system fits all" activity. We can now focus on the camp and travel skill set of a standard course, while also emphasizing judgment and decision-making in all aspects of the course, not just "classic" risk management.

As backpacking is further simplified (as many would argue it should be) many longtime field instructors are now excited to head back into the mountains on personal trips with the freedoms afforded by lightweight systems. We believe this may be one of the most important influences that the lightweight world can have on NOLS. It can help us to enjoy the wilderness beyond it being our workplace, reminding many of us that we came to the field of outdoor education to enjoy these places and share that enjoyment with others. While NOLS as a community has long been passionate about both its work and play, backpacking can again be embraced in the category of play with the simplicity, comfort, and even excitement lightweight backpacking returns to the pursuit.

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IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Though this lightweight revolution has impacted NOLS, it isn't just about our school. Without the support of Backpacking Light (Ryan Jordan in particular) and Demetri Coupounas at GoLite, we wouldn't be where we are today, and we value the relationships that we've built within the lightweight community. We hope that we can give back to that community in many ways.

Mike C! has been a contributor to Backpacking Light, sharing, among other techniques, the finer points of muffin making with the lightweight community. Cumulative years spent traveling and camping in remote wilderness areas gives NOLSies a unique perspective on what works and what doesn't. It also allows us to provide real world gear testing data based on actual use beyond what the layperson may ever put gear through. While we hope that all this benefits the community of lightweight backpackers, we also hope to provide valuable real world testing at minimal expense to manufacturers, helping companies figure out what gear works best, in both durability and functionality over large numbers of user days. All this can lead to better gear for everyone.

NOLS has a long history of Leave No Trace education, and as a founding member and the prime developer of the LNT curriculum[4], we are well-positioned to share more of this valuable skill set with the lightweight world. Almost two years ago, NOLSies even taught GoLite athlete Andrew Skurka the proper techniques for human waste disposal in the backcountry.

We are excited to get people started with lightweight backpacking from the start of their backpacking experience. Overwhelmingly, instructors understand that this is a style of travel that students are more likely to use on their own after their NOLS course, and if we increase the number of advocates for backcountry wilderness travel, we increase the collective voice available to protect these beautiful places. Lighter packs are just a comfortable side effect.

The part that is the most exciting for us is the extended expedition possibilities that are available using lightweight techniques: the ability to travel for two weeks or more unsupported, in remote wilderness around the world. Our friendship with Ryan Jordan has been inspiring in part because he really "gets" this aspect of wilderness travel, and he understands that this is what NOLS is good at. NOLS should be able to increase the awareness of and participation in long duration, expedition-style, lightweight travel. Ultimately, that is what this is all about... doing more with less. Going further afoot and exploring the wilderness inside each of us through the wilderness outside of ourselves.

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NOLS instructors hike through fresh snow in the Galiuro Mountains of southern Arizona on an Instructor Training trip. Eleven instructors participated in this training, an introduction to teaching lightweight backpacking skills. We ran the 2008 training in February at the suggestion of Ryan Jordan, in order to really put the gear and skills to the test and demonstrate to instructors that comfort is possible, even with minimal lightweight gear in challenging conditions. Photo by Scott Christy.

END NOTES

1. "Podcast: Is National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) Ready to Go Light?," by Carol Crooker. BackpackingLight.com (ISSN 1537-0364). http://backpackinglight.com/cgi-bin/backpackinglight/podcast_031807_NOLS_lightweight_hurdles.html, 2007-04-11.
2. "Groovy-Biotic Cooking: Quick, Healthy Meals with an Ultralight Cook Kit," by Mike Clelland!. BackpackingLight.com (ISSN 1537-0364). http://backpackinglight.com/cgi-bin/backpackinglight/quick_healthy_meals_with_an_ultralight_cook_kit.html, 2007-01-10.
3. Association for Experiential Education: About Experiential Education: What is Experiential Education? Association for Experiential Education. February 12, 2008. http://www.aee.org/customer/pages.php?pageid=47.
4. Leave No Trace Center For Outdoor Ethics. About us: History. February 12, 2008. http://www.lnt.org/aboutUs/history.php.

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Review

SPOT Satellite Personal Tracker

Does this highly anticipated technological breakthrough live up to the hype?

By Alan Dixon & Roger Caffin

The SPOT unit has the potential to be a breakthrough in backcountry safety. It's lighter, more compact, and less expensive than Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs), which can only transmit a distress signal to emergency services. It's lighter and less expensive than a satellite phone and has more coverage than a cell phone. The SPOT also has a Tracking (breadcrumb) mode, which automatically sends your location every ten minutes. Unlike PLBs (or even most cell or satellite phones), the SPOT unit can transmit your exact location plus one of several messages:

"I'm here and OK."
"I need help."
"Call 911 and rescue me."

Several of our testers believe that a device like the SPOT unit would alleviate their family's worrying back home, making it easier for them to get permission to go on backcountry trips. This is especially true for solo walkers or people who pursue dangerous endeavors like technical mountaineering in areas beyond cell phone coverage. However, Backpacking Light makes no formal recommendations about what safety equipment any outdoor enthusiast should carry.

On paper, the SPOT unit is an innovative concept for improving backcountry safety. In the field, it did not deliver "virtually every message" as the SPOT unit's literature claims, and the unit has usability problems. As such, we believe it has yet to deliver its promised functionality and message delivery reliably.

REVIEW OBJECTIVE AND TESTING

The SPOT unit manual claims "With a perfect view of the entire sky, the SPOT network is designed to successfully send virtually every message."

To investigate the above, four Backpacking Light reviewers tested two SPOT units for more than three months. We tested on two continents and in both northern and southern hemispheres. Over the course of our controlled testing and field testing, we sent hundreds of messages.

The SPOT unit uses a very complex system to successfully deliver a message. Any single failure in this long, multi-component, multi-technology system path results in no message delivery. Some of the components (the Globalstar satellites, supporting satellite ground stations, the

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Internet, and e-mail or SMS (phone) message systems) are substantially or entirely out of the SPOT unit's control. We found at least one instance of a system component downstream of the SPOT unit causing message losses in our testing. It is also possible that other unexplained long gaps with undelivered messages in our field testing might have been caused by a problem with a downstream component.

Initial glitches in new, complex systems like the SPOT are the norm, not the exception. In the future, SPOT may (or may not) fix many of these to significantly improve its performance from when we tested it and/or come out with a SPOT unit, Version 2. We asked John Dark, Senior Marketing Manager for SPOT, about improvements, and he said that, as a publicly traded company, SPOT could not commit to specific changes or time frames. SPOT's eventual success will be measured by:

1. Improvement in message delivery reliability.
2. Improvements to the user interface

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and operation of the unit, including the user manual.

3. Possible improvements to components downstream in the communication chain that the physical SPOT relies on for successful message delivery.

As a result of our testing, we made a number of recommendations for the current SPOT unit, as well as ones for a potential Version 2 of the physical SPOT unit, which could bring it closer to the performance and functionality of the manufacturer's claims and the field reliability expectations for backpackers and hikers. These recommendations are covered in the online portion of this Review.

ANALYSIS OF TEST RESULTS

Antenna Design

The SPOT unit receives signals from GPS satellites on one frequency and transmits messages to communications satellites on another frequency. It uses the same antenna to do both. One antenna cannot be optimized for two frequencies. If it works better for one frequency (message transmission) then it will not work as well for the other frequency (GPS location reception) or vice versa.

We asked John Dark of SPOT about the shared antenna design. He said their design favors message transmission. They picked favoring transmission because they believe getting an emergency message out is the highest priority. Even without a GPS position, a Help or 911 message is still of great value.

The choice of a single antenna that favors message transmission may be why the SPOT unit does not have the same GPS fix performance of a handheld GPS unit using a similarly sensitive GPS chipset (The GPS-only unit presumably has an antenna optimized solely for best GPS reception.).

A reduction in GPS performance has problematic implications. First, the last known location of the party is a vital piece of information for SAR personnel. Second, two modes of the SPOT unit, OK and Tracking, require a GPS fix or they will not transmit. Lack of GPS reception is one possible contributor for the OK and Tracking modes to have lower successful message delivery rates than Help messages, which do not require a GPS fix.

One of our recommendations for improving the SPOT unit is to use two dedicated antennas, one optimized for receiving GPS signals and another for transmitting messages.

Obtaining a GPS Fix

We found that the SPOT unit could not match the GPS reception performance of the best current generation handheld GPS units. Heavy tree cover and other obstructions that limit sky view challenge most GPS units, but recent high sensitivity GPS chipsets have decreased this problem.

To see how the SPOT unit did with a limited sky view, we tested GPS performance under an overhang with two Garmin GPS units and the SPOT unit. At two positions, the SPOT unit failed to get a GPS fix while the latest version of the Garmin H series GPS acquired a fix in both positions. An early generation technology Garmin unit was comparable in performance to the SPOT unit.

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We also field tested the SPOT unit under heavy tree cover. In this case, a substantially older technology Garmin unit appeared to outperform the SPOT unit. (Note that this was comparing GPS track points to the SPOT unit's delivered messages, so this is not an exact comparison.)

The SPOT instructions recommend using the SPOT unit horizontally (face up). We found that tilting the SPOT unit sideways significantly reduced GPS performance. When the SPOT unit is stuffed into a pack, some degree of tilt is almost inevitable, though we found that tilt of less than forty-five degrees would not significantly affect GPS performance. From our testing, we also found that the ninety degree angle (from horizontal) created by hanging the SPOT from its belt clip reduced successful message transmission rates in Tracking mode.

Nearby cliffs and boulders can cause reflections of the signals transmitted from the GPS satellite, which can make the apparent position to be in error by a kilometer or more (we experienced this with a nearby cliff in one field test). However, it seems the SPOT unit is more prone to problems here than some other GPS units, such as a Garmin H series unit.

Field testing the SPOT in Australia.

Tracking Mode When Backpacking or Hiking

We found Tracking mode when backpacking or hiking had low message delivery rates. Antenna design and GPS performance may be factors, since Tracking messages are not transmitted without a GPS fix. It is difficult to mount or hold the SPOT unit in a way that your body (especially torso) doesn't block a good portion of the sky view. Block some sky view, and you affect GPS reception.

Four of our testers evaluated successful message delivery rates while walking with the SPOT in Tracking mode. They typically put the SPOT face up in a fanny pack or horizontally on the top of a backpack, hip mounted it as the SPOT Manual suggests, or held the unit in front of them. Each went for a one-hour or longer walk in Tracking mode. In two cases, no messages were successfully delivered during the entire walk. In another, a single message was received in the entire hour. Careful inspection of the coordinates showed it had been transmitted when the walker stopped (at a known location) to

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re-lace a shoe. In several cases, the SPOT unit was placed face up on a rock under a clear sky for some time immediately after the walker returned home, and in each case, most of the messages from this stationary position were received.

Two possible contributors to undelivered messages would be reduced GPS performance due to movement of the SPOT unit or limited sky view for the SPOT unit when it was close to the hiker's body (the body blocks sky view). From our testing on a moving kayak, which had higher message transmission rates than walking, it is probable that close proximity to the hiker's body is the greater contributor, but we cannot completely rule out movement as a secondary contributor. There may even be other factors at play to prevent message delivery.

We asked John Dark of SPOT about our undelivered Tracking messages. He said that other users had reported undelivered Tracking messages as well. For best use of Tracking mode, he suggested "mounting the SPOT unit horizontally on the top of a pack shoulder strap. In this way, only your head blocks a portion of the sky." (Note: the User Manual instructs a vertical mounting at your waist using the SPOT unit's belt clip.)

We agree that the top of the shoulder strap mounting would probably improve Tracking message delivery, as no portion of your torso would block sky view. However, even with a perfect view of the entire sky, our testing indicated average daily Tracking message delivery rates of 83%, with some rates as low as 17% in a given one-hour period.

FACING: Two out of every ten messages did not get through: Although there are a few obvious large transmission gaps (indicated with a yellow arrows), transmission appears generally good for the trip. However, even in what appear to be the consistent transmission sections there are smaller and even moderate sized gaps (white arrow).

Message Reliability

In various controlled tests and our field testing, we found that somewhere between 0% and 83% of messages were successfully delivered, depending on the amount of sky visible to the SPOT unit and the mode used. This is a broad range. In addition, difficulties with SPOT unit's user interface meant that incorrect modes were sometimes activated, which resulted in unsent messages. These unsent messages were not counted in our reliability figures, but nevertheless may affect users' real world reliability.

SPOT recognizes that not all messages will be delivered, and addresses this by sending multiple messages. A single OK message is transmitted up to three times in twenty minutes. A Help message is transmitted once every five minutes for an hour. A 911 message is transmitted every five minutes until the batteries give out.

Our testing suggested that Help and 911 messages would have a high probability of being delivered "with a perfect view of the entire sky" when in SPOT's high coverage areas. OK and Tracking messages would have a good but lesser probability of successful delivery "with a perfect view of the entire sky."

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BACKPACKINGLIGHT.COM FORUM POSTS ABOUT SPOT

Spot and Kayaking

I've had my unit since they were first released and have enjoyed using it, but that's only been for kayaking, where, as noted, you do usually have an unrestricted view of the sky. Thus any comments here reflect that usage.

One good test was during this year's Everglades Challenge, a 300+ mile kayak race from Tampa Bay to Key Largo (www.watertribe.com). This was an overnighted replacement unit as my original one malfunctioned. One trick I learned is that you can't have tracking on and try and send an OK message - tracking must first be turned off. So for that, and having to let my base know where I was every 24 hours, the OK function was excellent. The unit even let my partner know I was coming in a day earlier than expected (no possible cell phone coverage).

All this being said, I also carry a PLB. For safety purposes, I do believe SPOT can be a useful addition to one's repertoire - and there are stories to back this up (eg. Canadian sea kayaker off Tasmania earlier this year), but for the fun aspect of being able to have friends and family know where you are, that you're "OK" and that they can track you, SPOT is a heap of fun.

Kristin Greenaway

Well Done Reviewers...

... but too late to save me the cost of a unit and activation.

I'm delighted with the quality of your research and reporting on the SPOT. I too have had experience with the unit, most recently on an eight day Grand Canyon crosscountry route, and like others had a roughly 60% success rate on all OK messages. Better than nothing I guess but not what I believed would be delivered by the unit.

I'd also like to comment on the web site, activation process and customer service. Unlike the reviewers I found the problems in these areas to be ridiculous. From start to finish it took me sixty-eight hours, seven phone calls, four e-mails and an overall blood pressure increase of thirty points (on both readings) to activate my unit. Not only that but my original order of the unit via Google was with what turned out to be an unauthorized dealer who took my money and didn't bother to ship the unit. Told all of my problems would be looked into and the appropriate changes made by top sales personnel in the Canadian office well over a month ago and I'm still waiting for the promised follow up.

My advice, save your money. Me, I'm thinking of e-mailing "Survivor Man" about the dangers of delving into the dangerous world of start up high tech companies.

Mark O'Keefe

Spot in Real Life

I have a SPOT and so far continue to use it and carry it along. Perhaps my expectations are lower than most but I'm happy with it. I feel that it has been better than a cell phone (which rarely works where I go) and even if only 50% of the messages get through, that's enough for me. Mostly I know a couple messages sent will keep my family assured that I'm okay but they also know that no messages does not indicate a problem. I also know that in an true real life emergency, the 7oz SPOT might help me out if I've exhausted every option to help myself out. That's about all I can expect from it right now but it seems worthwhile anyway. I will be taking it along for 2700+ solo miles in a couple weeks (on my mountain bike) and that will be an interesting exercise. At the very least, one "okay" message getting through per day makes my wife feel better.

Christopher Plesko

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It is unclear what the SPOT unit's reliability of successfully delivering messages (four types) would be in field conditions likely to be encountered backpacking and hiking (conditions with less than a perfect view of the entire sky), and if that reliability would be sufficient.

No Message Delivery Confirmation

Another wrinkle to the possibility of an undelivered message(s) is that the SPOT unit cannot confirm successful message delivery. The SPOT unit sends to communications satellites, but cannot receive from the satellites. Thus, there is no way to send a message delivery confirmation back to the SPOT unit.

Suppose a hiker has severely sprained an ankle or broken a leg in an area of heavy tree cover or in a deep canyon with limited sky view. Should they assume a Help or 911 message was successfully delivered and with a good GPS location? If so, they should probably sit tight and wait for rescue. Or should they assume a low probability of message delivery (and/or the lack of GPS location) and hobble as best they can towards some place where they can get help or at least have a higher chance of being discovered?

If our hiker decided to stay put, but the SPOT unit's message was not delivered (or lacked a GPS location), they could be in for a long, cold, and hungry wait. If they decide to hobble to a better location, and the message was delivered, they may unnecessarily cause a far more serious injury to themselves, and they will not be near the location of their Help or 911 messages, where SAR will look first. The range of problematic scenarios in this vein is worth consideration.

SPOT User Interface

The SPOT unit has only four buttons and four LEDs. It should be simple to use. In practice, we found it confusing to activate, cancel, and inactivate all the SPOT functions. Different modes are activated by long or short presses of the same button. Some modes stop by themselves, some can be cancelled by button presses, and others can only be stopped by turning the unit off. We believe that most users would need a field crib sheet to remember all the operations. We also found the few LEDs and their cryptic combinations of flashes did not provide enough feedback on what the SPOT unit was or was not doing, even if one had nothing to do but stare at the LEDs, which is usually not the case in the field. The attempt to transmit a message is indicated by the LEDs going solid for two seconds. Blink and you'll miss whether the SPOT transmitted a message or not. The SPOT does not keep track of attempted message transmission. Once that information is gone, it's gone.

A usability example: Pressing the 'OK' button normally causes the SPOT unit to send up to three OK messages with the same GPS coordinates. Pressing it for more than five seconds puts it into the Tracking mode, which sends one message every ten minutes until you turn it off. The status flash sequence is the same for both modes, so you have no idea which mode is active.

The problem is that the feedback provided by the current SPOT design con-

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sists of a few flashes of the LEDs. In many situations, it's not feasible to sit and focus on the SPOT LEDs for up to twenty minutes to find out what the SPOT is doing, if it has a GPS fix, and if a message was sent. Look away briefly and you might miss an important LED flash. Was a message sent or not? If it was sent, what type of message? What mode is the SPOT in? This may not be the best design for an emergency/safety system.

John Dark of SPOT told us that other users have reported inadvertently activating OK when they intended to activate Tracking. SPOT intends to re-write the manual to look for a solid LED light indication that Tracking has been activated, rather than waiting a potentially ambiguous five seconds. This rewrite will still not change the same status flash sequence that OK and Tracking modes share.

Enhanced SPOT Display

All our Testers noted that the SPOT unit had the current GPS coordinates inside but could not display them. Many problem situations are little more than "Where are we?" Displaying your position on the SPOT unit could possibly eliminate the need to carry a separate GPS unit. As noted earlier, the four LEDs convey very little information about the operation of the SPOT unit. Many times, we wished for an improved display for feedback on the current SPOT mode, the quality of the GPS fix, and number of attempted message deliveries, etc. A more sophisticated LCD text display is the obvious solution to these needs, though it would decrease the impressive battery life.

In the End, It's a Personal Decision

We neither encourage nor discourage using the SPOT unit. No system is 100% reliable in all conditions. No piece of equipment is appropriate for all situations. On paper, the SPOT unit is clearly an innovative backcountry safety product. The question remains: Does SPOT deliver messages with sufficient reliability - not just for a "perfect view of the entire sky," but with sufficient reliability for conditions likely to be encountered in the field when backpacking or hiking?

We are aware that there may be some positive reviews and significant endorsements for the SPOT. We ask the reader to ascertain if these are based solely on unverified SPOT performance claims or whether they provide a body of test data to substantiate those positive opinions.

In the end it is up to each potential SPOT user to determine

- their communications needs,
- the level risk they are comfortable with,
- what message delivery reliability they deem acceptable,
- and under what conditions they expect to transmit messages.

We hope that our readers will use all available information - this review, other publication's reviews, SPOT's literature, and any other materials - to make their best decision.

Read the complete review and technical analysis at http://backpackinglight.com/spot

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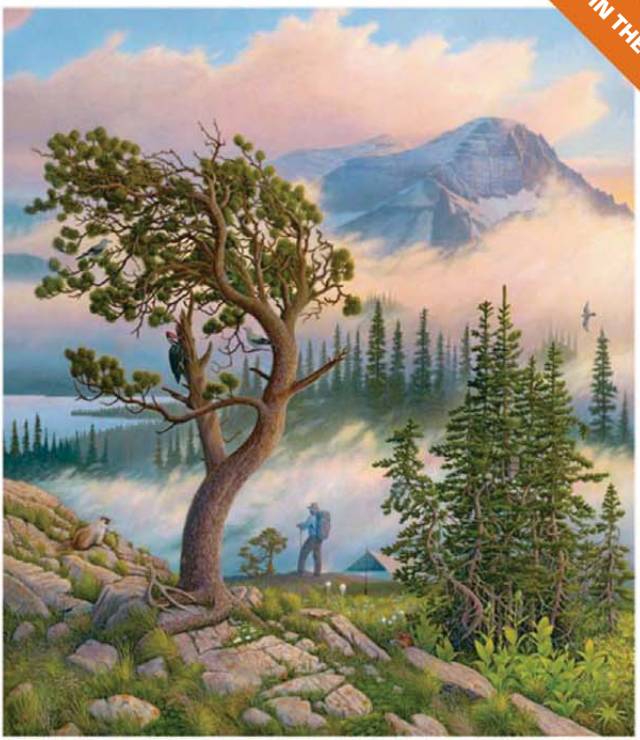
NEW IN THE SHOP



LIGHT IN THE WILD

Backpacking Light Magazine

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Tiny Homes

By Nicole Chilton

Jay Shafer doesn't want a lot of stuff. In fact, he doesn't even want a lot of room. But because small housing units, such as Airstream trailers, aren't necessarily meant for full-time occupancy, Jay found that if he wanted to live small, he was going to have to design a home and build it himself. Since 2000, Shafer has been building and living in tiny homes that are smaller than some American closets. He built his first tiny home in 2000 and soon thereafter created the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company to be able to bring his designs to others who also wanted to live smaller. The website, tumbleweedhouses.com, became an oasis of small housing in a sea of ever-growing floor plans, quickly becoming a popular and attractive alternative to the American way of housing.

The first tiny home Jay tried was an Airstream trailer in Iowa, but the lack of winterization on the trailer made for a fairly cold and uncomfortable environment. His next home, a much more permanent dwelling, was made with careful craftsmanship, outfitted with closets and clever storage spaces and trimmed in pine and stainless steel. It was also less than one hundred square feet. His motivation for living in so small a space? "I see extra stuff as being a burden," says Jay. "Anything that isn't working for me directly in terms of making my life better is working against me."

Jay's website, which includes enough information, slide shows, and videos to be called roomy, shows that living with less in less can be really be more. His homes are versatile, multi-purpose, and designed with functionality as a top priority. And because some of the home designs are affixed to trailers, they can easily be moved to a new location. Since switching to life in a tiny home, Jay has been able to live in about ten different locations, all in or around three towns. For someone with a touch of wanderlust, the appeal of a permanent - yet mobile - home can be a huge draw.

Who is the target market for a tiny home? With the exception of one design, which boasts an arm-stretching 770 square feet, nearly all of the one-bedroom designs are best suited for a single individual. Even then, that single individual is part of a small (no pun intended) group of people whose lives can comfortably fit into roughly one hundred square feet or less. "They're just looking for less responsibility, or they spend a lot of time outside, or when they're inside, they spend most of their time at a desk," says Jay of the folks who live in the tiny homes full time.

For the curious and/or skeptical individual, there are video tours on the website that show it is quite possible not only to function, but also to enjoy the smaller, simpler life. Jay does not disclose where the tiny homes are located to protect the privacy of their owners, but he is happy to give understandably short tours of his home once a month.

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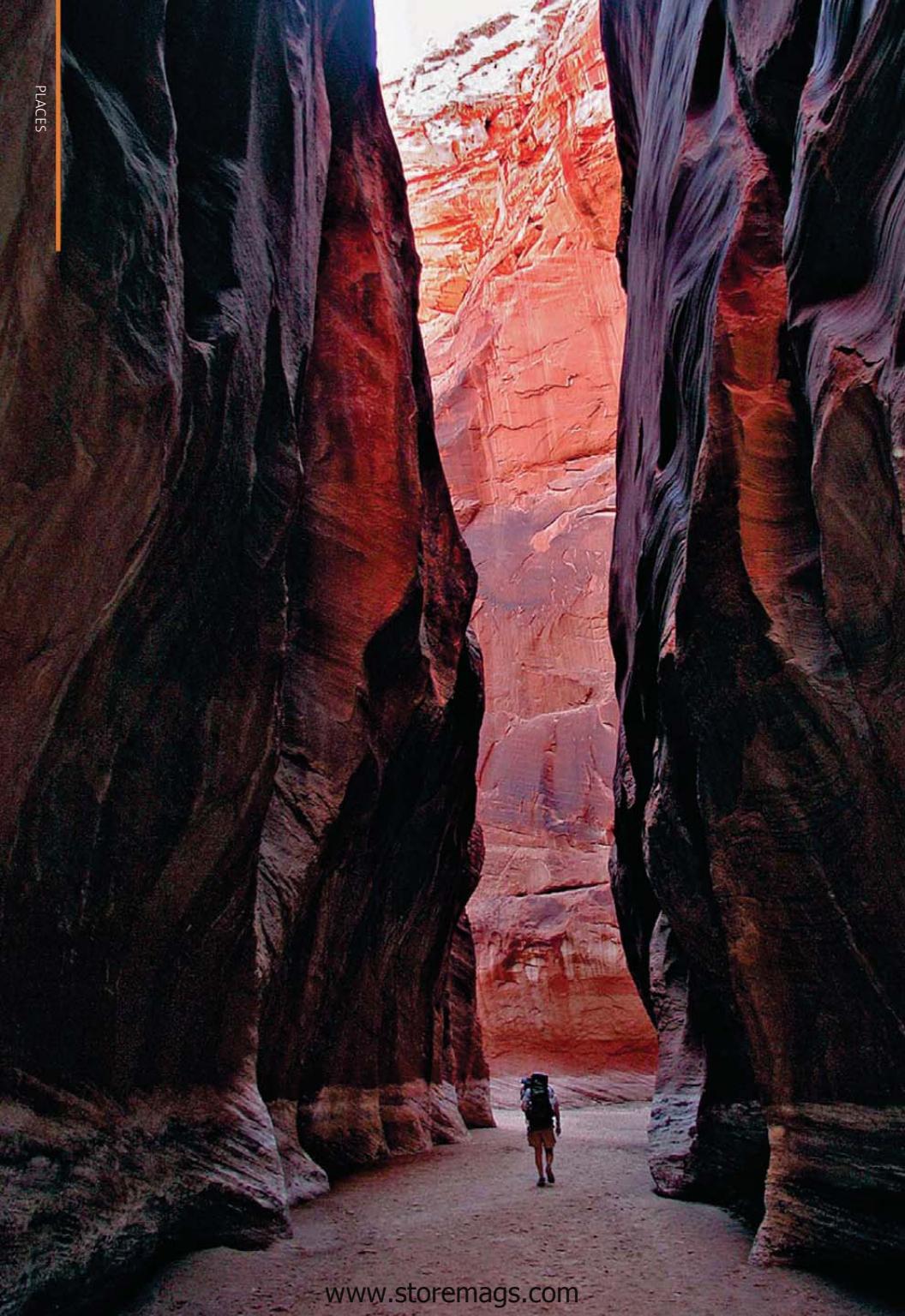

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Slickrock

A Canyoneering Photo Essay from the Escalante River Canyon

By Alan Dixon

For most of my life, backpacking was synonymous with the alpine terrain of western mountains – the Sierras and Rockies – the higher the elevation, the better. One spring about ten years ago, I got a trail itch something awful. I couldn't wait for the mountain snows to melt, and a friend suggested canyoneering. That May I took my first canyoneering trip in southern Utah.

Since then, I've spent more time in the canyons of the southwest than in the mountains. For me, canyoneering is mountain climbing as a reverse image. Rather than striving for the highest point to look down, you are in the bottom of a canyon with the world above you. It is a more intimate and enveloping way of viewing your surroundings.

Some spiritual questions I ask myself: Why do we strive to get either above or below our normal mode of existence? Why are we drawn to the somewhat barren landscapes of the high alpine mountains and slickrock desert canyons? Are we looking for simplification? Otherness? Why do we find these regions so beautiful?

I may never find answers to these questions. I do know that the canyons of southern Utah are a spiritual center for me. A cathedral-like grotto at the end of a secluded side canyon, reddish light filtering down from the top of a deep slot, a cold dip in a spring-fed pothole under a blazing desert sun, Anasazi rock art and dwellings, looking down from that perfect campsite perched precariously high on the canyon rim... each is deeply satisfying.

For me, the ideal canyoneering trip is a combination of time on the canyon bottom and time on the rim and mesa above the canyon. Canyoneering challenges my navigation and technical skills. Routes in and out of canyons are rare and frequently difficult to find. Bushwhacking through dense willows, tamarisk, and poison ivy can make progress slow and tedious. Un-roped climbs on steep slickrock make my heart race and palms sweat. Cold and high rivers can be difficult to wade. Thankfully, there's always some awe-inspiring payoff around the next bend in the canyon, frequently painted in brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows.

There's always some awe-inspiring payoff around the next bend in the canyon, frequently painted in warm jewel tones, such as this section of the Paria Narrows, just as the sun climbs high enough to make the sandstone in the distant bend glow. The foreground is still dull and dark in late morning shadow. After a few days of canyoneering, you become a connoisseur of the subtle and sometimes dramatic interactions between sun and slickrock.

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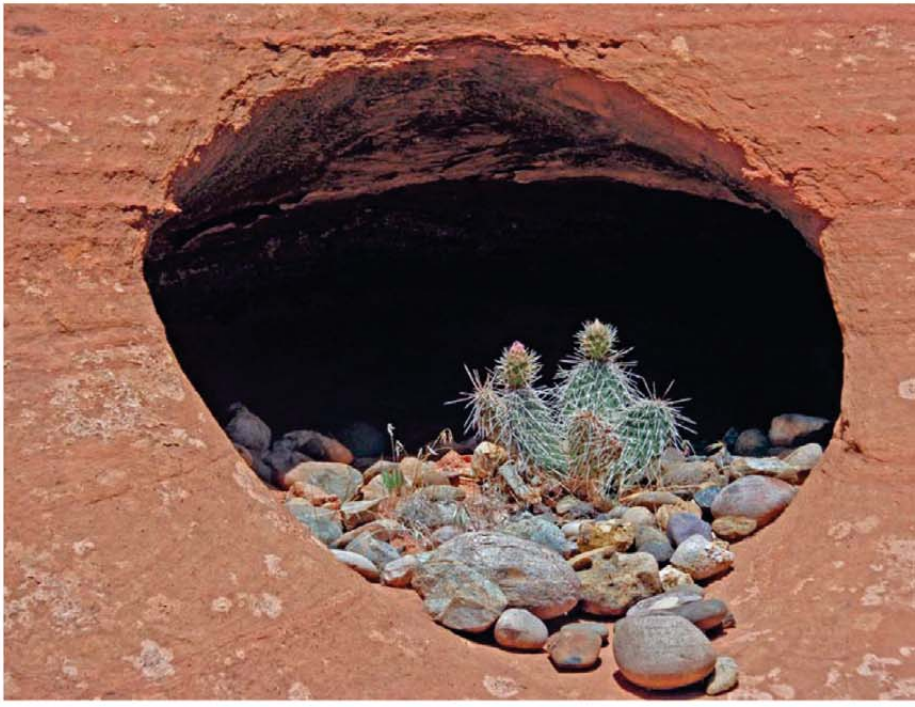

A desert cactus garden nestled in the natural planter of a slickrock wall. This cluster is probably Claret Cup or Hedgehog (*Echinocereus triglochidiatus*), a common canyon cactus with a brilliant red cup-shaped blossom that resembles a wine glass filled with claret.

FACING: A justifiably famous and often-photographed cathedral in the Escalante River drainage. A cathedral is a sudden drop in a canyon that has been hollowed out by a pouroff (a usually dry waterfall). The rounded-out shape and overhanging roof of stone reminds one of a gothic cathedral. Cathedrals usually have a pool of water at the bottom, carved out by the force of water when the pouroff is running. The reflections of the seep-fed wall gardens in the pool, the lofty ceiling, and the cool temperatures create instant serenity.

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Canyon rim view up the Escalante river. For us, a perfect canyon trip has equal time on the canyon bottom and on the rim above the canyon. Most times, it is far more challenging to traverse along the rim than trek along the canyon floor. Routes getting us to and from the canyon rim are few and often technically challenging, but the reward is great.

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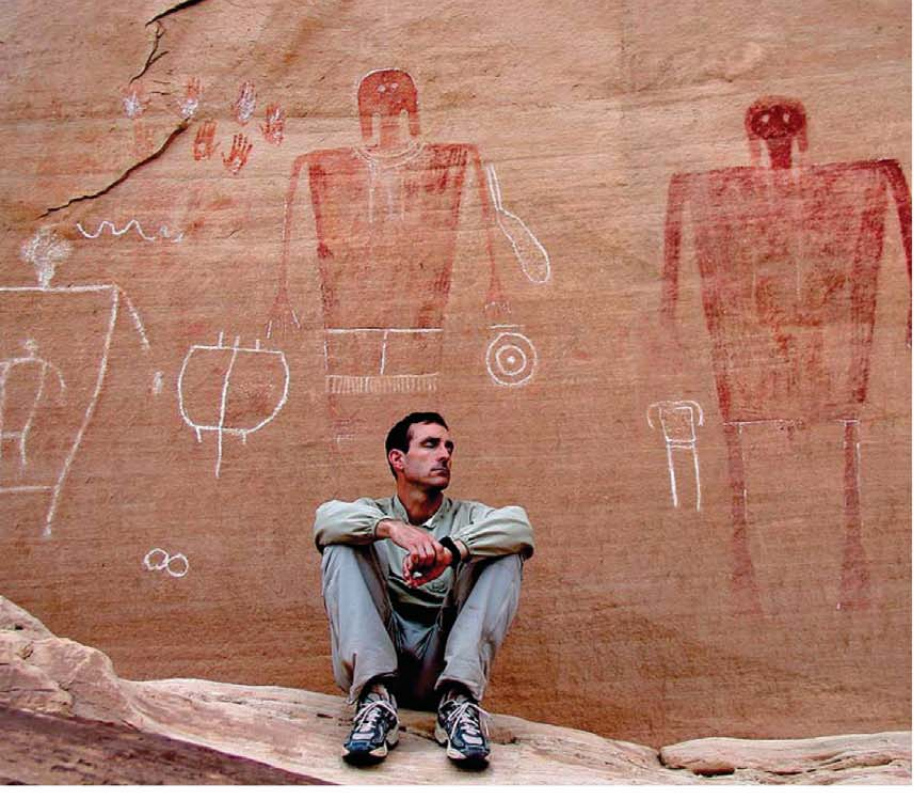

Spending quiet time with ancient Anasazi art, I get an eerie tingle as I look at handprints and art placed there by a fellow human over 1,000 years ago. I wonder what they were like, what they were thinking, and what these drawings signified to them. Looking at this art, I feel a strange human connectedness by our shared spiritual awe in the canyons.

FACING: Perfect light: Brilliant oranges and reds from sunlight filtering into a slot canyon. For narrow slot canyons, the "magic hour" for photography is not early morning or late evening, but is typically close to high noon with the sun directly over the canyon. Only then does the light penetrate, causing the sandstone to come alive and glow.

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A cliff dwelling with 1,000-year-old green paint still on its walls. Not surprisingly, it's called "Green House." I wonder if other ruins less shielded from the sun and elements might also have had colorful decorations on their walls?

FACING: Squeezing up a tight chimney in a slot canyon exit to the mesa. Routes in and out of canyons are infrequent and many times challenging. On some trips, my wife and I carry a rope, harnesses, and a minimal set of climbing gear. My wife gets a belay, and we haul or lower the packs with the rope. I get to up-climb or down-climb "free" since there is usually no way to put protection in on the slickrock. On some trips we forgo the climbing gear and just wing it on Class IV and V sections. Photo by Alison Simon.

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The mother of all potholes and a superb slickrock camp. After a hot and tedious bush-whack up-canyon and an unprotected Class V down-climb, we were rewarded with a refreshing swim at a campsite overlooking this deep pool. These large potholes are gouged out of soft sandstone by the force of the waterfall above them. In the dry season, these natural reservoirs are one of the few reliable sources of water.

FACING: At this point near the end of Buckskin Gulch (one of the more famous slot canyons in Utah), the walls of the canyon extend almost 500 feet above you. At over thirteen miles long, Buckskin is the longest and deepest slot canyon in the southwestern United States, and possibly in the world. In many places, you can stretch out your arms and touch both walls. Buckskin Gulch feeds into the equally famous Paria Narrows. The combination trip of Buckskin Gulch and Paria Narrows draws an international crowd of canyon aficionados.

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Erä Skiing

Cross-Country Skiing in Eastern Finland

By Chris Eastwood, with editorial assistance from Roger Caffin

Editor's Note: Chris Eastwood, the narrator, is a native Australian currently living in Finland. Roger Caffin is a native Australian who would like to visit Finland.

Fans of Monty Python might be familiar with Finland, but it's perhaps less well known to the rest of us. If you are into backcountry skiing and your ideal holiday is to get away from everything and everyone for a few nights in the wild, then eastern Finland just might be the place for you. I spent an interesting three days skiing around a section of the Koita River (Koitajoki in Finnish) in Koivusuo. I think it was the most enjoyable lightweight backpacking experience of my life, although the word "lightweight" does have to be put into context.

Finland is nestled between Russia and Scandinavia and is perhaps one of the least considered destinations for international travelers in Europe. This

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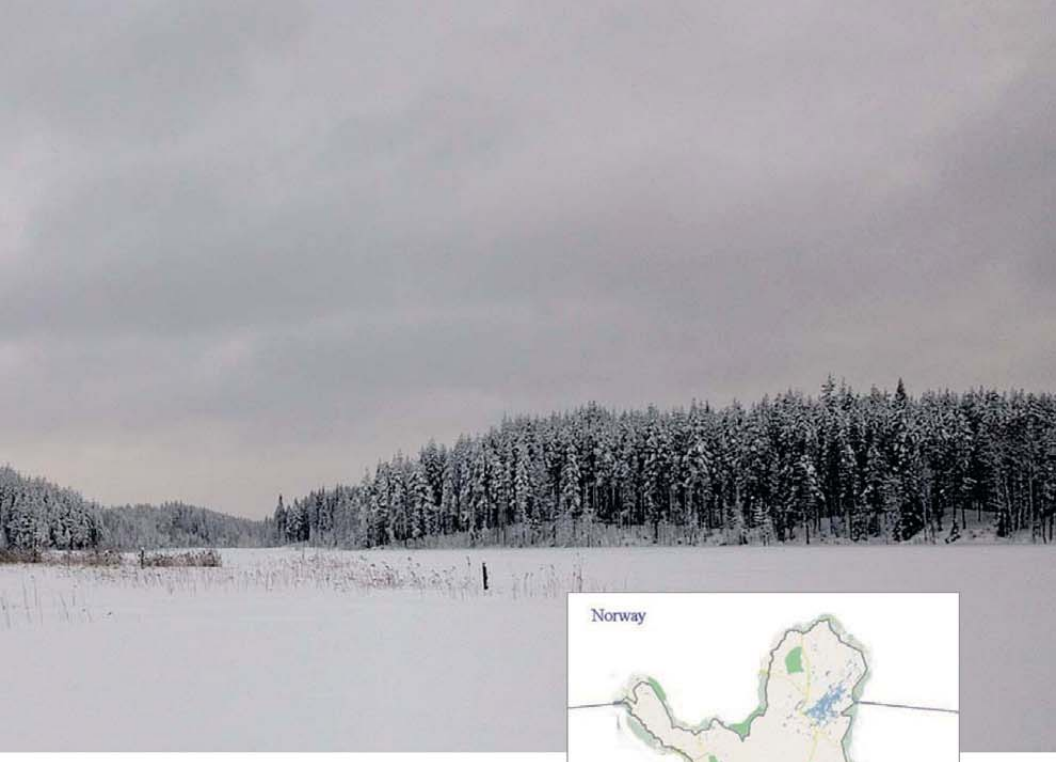

makes it almost ideal for outdoor folks who love to get away from the regular tourist circuit and enjoy the forest undisturbed by other travelers.

The southeastern area of Finland, near the border with Russia, is less developed than the western areas, with far less infrastructure and less agriculture. Much of it verges on swampland in the summer, so apart from forestry, there is little development there. This means you can be almost sure of having National Parks to yourself, especially in the winter. The area is also blessed with reliable snowfall and low temperatures. Combined with the relatively flat countryside, this makes it almost perfect for cross-country ski touring - or erä skiing, as they call it here.

Finland

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Ski touring is not a modern fad in Finland. People have been skiing for centuries there; it has been a lifestyle and an essential part of transport for centuries. People have a different view about skiing and equipment compared to other places, where skiing was introduced as a form of recreation. In addition, snow conditions in Finland are different from those in North America or central Europe, so the skis and equipment are also somewhat different. For example, using a pulk for carrying your gear is common, and skis are often wider (70 mm) and longer (2.5 meters) than many groomed track skiers might be used to. Part of the reason for this difference lies in the colder temperatures and lighter winds found in Finland, leading to softer, fluffier snow conditions.

On this trip, we went to a place called Koivusuo, which literally means "birch swamp," on the eastern side of Finland near Ilomantsi, about 500 kilometers northwest from Helsinki. If you were to hire a car from the airport in Helsinki, you could drive through Lahti to Joensuu, then on to Ilomantsi; this is the best route for conditions and traffic, and the National Park is about twenty kilometers east-northeast of Ilomantsi.

MAPS

Maps can be found on the Finnish Luontoon web site <www.luontoon.fi>. Google Earth can also be helpful for route planning.

It can be very beautiful country, which makes for enjoyable ski touring, and it's hard to ask for a nicer place to visit. We couldn't have had better conditions for our trip: good snowfall and low temperatures combined to give us a winter wonderland of perfect powder snow about knee-deep. Australians can only dream about this!

Trip Planning

Picking a time for a Finnish trip is important. The end of January through February is the coldest time in Finland, and temperatures in the eastern areas can be as low as -35 °C to -40 °C (-31 °F to -40 °F). Remember, we're at quite a distance north here, and you have much less daylight than in European locations further to the south, which also restricts your travel distance. For people who may not be used to skiing in these conditions (less than -20 °C, or -4 °F), it should be emphasized that this makes for some challenging times. Both safety and reliable equipment are paramount.

What may be entirely unexpected for recreational skiers is that, in these cold conditions, there is almost no glide on your skis. It is so cold that the snow does not melt with contact from your skis to make them glide. With your skis ankle-deep in powder, it's almost like skiing on a sandy beach. Worse, the absence of glide means that if you push on too hard in order to cover more distance, the low

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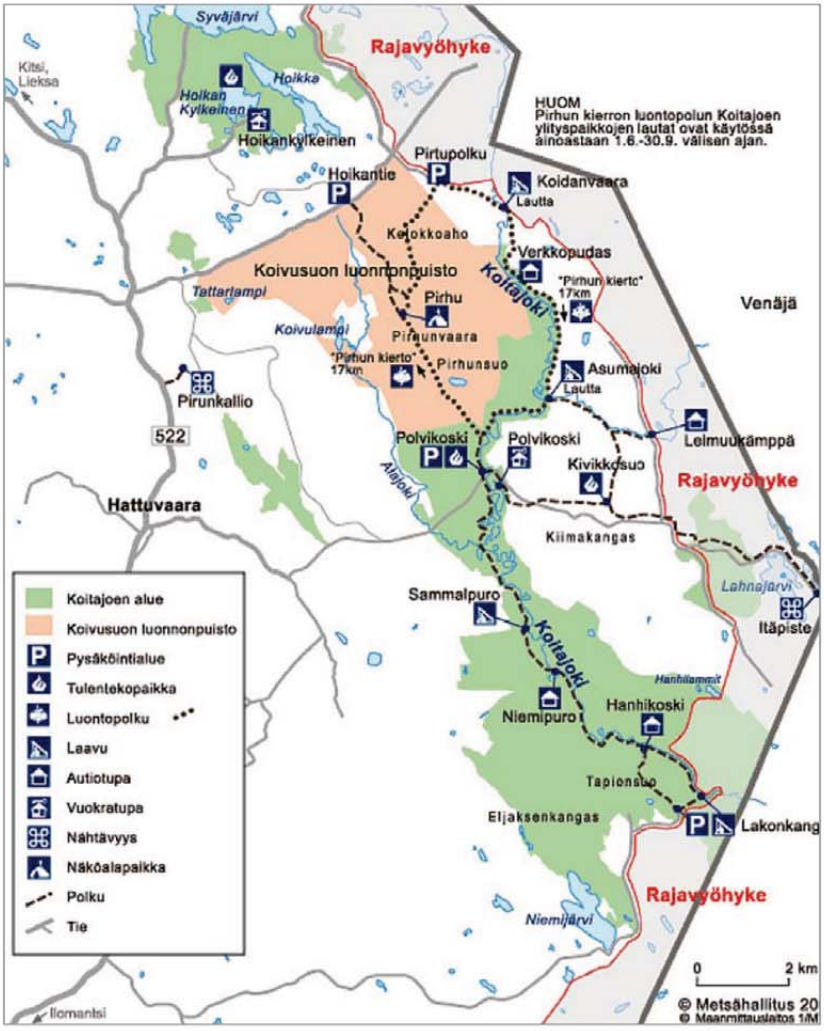

Koivusio Region

temperature makes breathing uncomfortable. You might just get frost nibble on the tip of your tongue when hard going is called for – and that's not enjoyable! These conditions translate to a need to adjust your plan to suit the conditions.

You should expect to cover less time in a day than you might be used to under milder conditions. Even with the right

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Tucked neatly into a sled, gear is quickly available and leaves no weight on your back.

gear, experienced skiers in this area don't expect to cover more than fifteen kilometers per day on even terrain when it's below -10 °C (14 °F). The terrain may be flat, but that does not mean it's fast.

Clothing and Sweating

Another aspect of gear worth knowing about is clothing. It's a different climate here compared to sunny Queensland in Australia, and it's made me rethink some previously held beliefs. Proper clothing is really an important safety item and is absolutely essential in this kind of trekking. It's much easier to *stay* warm than it is to *get* warm.

Temperatures can vary from as warm as -5 °C to as cold as - 40 °C (23 °F to -40 °F), so you need to plan to have a range of clothes and good equipment to keep yourself warm and safe, depending on what conditions you find. Yes: this means you have to carry a wider range of clothing than you might expect, but you really don't want to be poorly equipped when the temperature suddenly drops twenty degrees to -40 °C (-40 °F). This can and does happen.

Having a number of layers is important, as is being able to add and remove them. The layer next to your skin doesn't need to be thick, so thin, synthetic, thermal underwear works nicely at moving the sweat away from your body while giving you the first layer of insulation. Next comes a thin fleece

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The combination of thin, heatless midday sun and a lack of wind allows fine ice crystals to feather anything stationary.

over that, both top and pants. Depending on your activity level and your personal comfort level, you might then put on a woolen jumper or a heavier fleece over that, and finally a waterproof shell jacket and pants. Gore-Tex works well in this climate, but you can use one of the lower priced alternative membrane fabrics. These layers will allow you to keep warm when moving (and generating heat) as well as keep you dry from the snow. In addition to getting snow on you from falling over (it happens), I found that snow could fall onto you from branches, especially when assisted by fun-loving members of your party.

You must monitor how much you're sweating, and you should strip off some layers of clothing as you start to exercise to keep it under control. Getting sweaty means getting wet, getting wet means getting cold, and getting cold at -40 °C (-40 °F) means you'll be uncomfortable at the very least. I've had a sweat-soaked shirt freeze and press against my skin for an hour or so, and I can tell you it saps the heat out of you very quickly.

Keep a down jacket handy for putting on over the top of everything (yes, including the shell layer) as soon as you stop, to maintain your warmth before you start getting cold at rest. Just make

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Not a soul but us, accompanied only by perfect weather.

sure that the shell is not covered in snow when you put on your down jacket.

Pulks and Packs

The pulks are simply wonderful: they let you carry all your extra gear. You can put thirty kilograms of bulky items - like a full stainless steel thermos, a snow shovel, a thick foam sleeping roll, down jackets, spare warm clothes, sleeping bags, extra food and a liquid fuel stove - onto a pulk without any problem. While it's true that the extra weight of all that gear slows you down a little, in many situations it's not significant, especially when you realize that you no longer need to compromise on essential gear. You also no longer spend time feeling like you're weighed down with an enormous pack.

Someone may spot the stainless steel thermos in that brief list and be tempted to say "What? Come on … it's not a picnic." To that I would reply, "Exactly!" When you've got a cup of warm, sweet berry juice in your hand "un-numbing" your fingers, instead of fiddling around with a cantankerous liquid fuel stove, you'll likely not be complaining that it was packed in the pulk.

The thing about carrying a pack on skis is that balance is much harder, and the risk of falling is higher. There's a lot of weight up high when you try to put it all

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Towing a pulk is much easier than carrying a pack in these conditions.

in a pack. It can be done, but it's hard.

If you haven't been ski touring much (and fallen over much), you won't really appreciate just how hard it is to get out from underneath a twenty-five kilogram pack when you're facedown in a snow bank that's about a meter deep (with both arms perhaps still in the straps of your ski poles). It does provide some good entertainment for the group, who after some time may stop laughing and help you get your skis off your feet and upright again. Maybe. I recommend you try this at home sometime, rather than flailing around face first in the snow when it's -20 °C (-4 °F), though I've found there's nothing quite like learning by doing.

In our group of four people, we had two pulks (although Mikko was carrying his gear in a backpack), which allowed us to divide our gear and take

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Cooking dinner on a table in a simple log cabin shelter.

turns pulling. There was no need for Mikko to take a backpack; he just felt like it. Of course, he was welcome to dump his pack into one of the sleds later, when he changed his mind.

Aside from the issues of balance and comfort, carrying your gear in the pulk allows you to ski more or less without any stress: you can relax and enjoy the beautiful Finnish scenery. After all, that's what we were there for.

Food

The combination of cold temperatures and the carrying capacity of pulks when touring opens up greater possibilities for what food can be carried. When hiking through the bush in my native Australia, water availability is always a significant issue. But in the snow, we don't need to carry any significant amount of water – although we do need to carry a reliable stove! What's more, some prepared food can be brought along in the pulk. In the cold conditions, food will stay safely frozen and ready for consumption when needed. There's no need for expensive lightweight dehydrated meals here.

Naturally, exercise in the cold means higher energy requirements, especially if you want to stay warm, so high carbohydrate food is always preferred. On our winter trips here, we typically carry food items such as:

- Mince, cooked as dry as possible (and perhaps with some ginger, garlic, or other favorite spices)
- Dehydrated vegetables like peas, corn, and beans
- Mashed potato powder
- White rice
- Nuts and dried fruit
- Chocolate
- Concentrated berry juice (for hot, sweet drinks)
- Sweet biscuits

All these are light in weight and high in energy. The meat may not be

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so high in energy, but having it means you don't get bored with the meals. A hot meal can be prepared in a few minutes by melting some snow, bringing that water to boil, adding some mince and dried vegetables, then after a few minutes of simmering, thickening it up with some dried mashed potato powder. After a couple of hours in the cold pulling a sled, everyone has their spoon ready when the pot comes off the stove!

For cooking we can use the wood stove in the hut or an open fire, or we can use a regular liquid fuel stove, such as those made by Primus or MSR.

Shelters

One of the very nice things about a harsh climate is that it encourages people to build huts for shelter along the frequented paths. At intervals along our path, about every five or ten kilometers, there are lean-to shelters or small log cabins. We can pull up, have lunch, stay the night, or simply warm up and shelter from bad weather.

If you check the Luontoon website (www.luontoon.fi) for the park that you intend to visit, you will probably find that there are some of these huts or more simple lean-to arrangements (see page 66), meaning that you might not need to unfold your tent. In fact, if you really know the country, you may not need to carry a tent at all – although that can be risky if anyone has an accident.

Inside these huts you'll find a wood stove, a supply of wood, and things left behind by others, like candles, matches, partially filled gas containers and perhaps a small amount of stove fuel or, sometimes, some of their excess canned food. The general attitude is that things like this can be at least useful for someone or perhaps make a survival difference for people in a tight situation. It's a great community outlook, and one that I have found elsewhere in the region, like in Sweden and Norway.

Carrying your gear in the pulk allows you to ski more or less without any stress: you can relax and enjoy the beautiful Finnish scenery.

There will likely be dry wood cut and stacked in the shelter already. The unwritten rule is that you replace the wood you've used in the shelter from the stack. It could just be that you are the one who comes in wet and cold when it's -20 °C (-4 °F), urgently needing to light a fire and start warming up. Of course, if you've thought ahead at lunch, you'll have a thermos of hot berry juice to give you some needed sugars and warmth while you're waiting for the fire to warm the shelter. No sense in being uncom-

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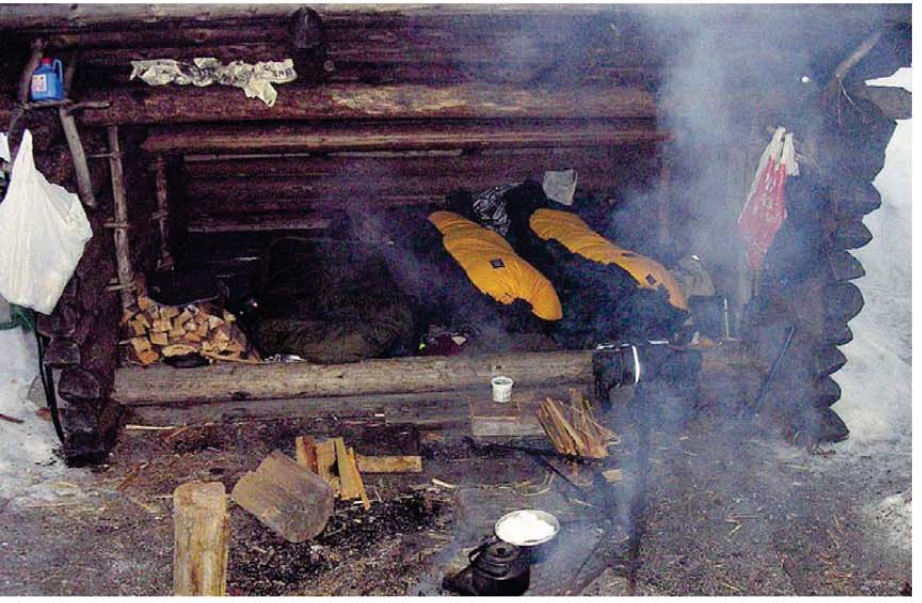

A simple lean-to shelter.

fortable just because you're alone in the wild, now, is there?

Among our gear we also carry a small tomahawk. My Fiskars tomahawk only weighs 450 grams and is well worth its weight, especially since we have the pulks, making the firewood supply much easier to maintain.

As I mentioned previously, in addition to the cabins along the route there are also some simple lean-to shelters. These are actually more common and are comprised of a simple floor to keep you off the ground, a sloping roof to keep the snow off you, and two walls to block some of the wind. Such "bus-stop" shelters are found in other countries around the world.

One of these lean-to shelters is just about all you need if you have the right clothes and sleeping bag. Unlike the cabins, which you can warm up ten or more degrees easily, you really need a good, warm sleeping bag and a high-density foam mat to insulate you from the ground or floor in these shelters. The two bags that you see in the photo of the shelter are Joutsen 2000 EXT models, which are rated to better than -15 °C (-35 °C at the extreme, or 5 °F to -31 °F), weigh about two kilograms each, and cost about US$800 each (ouch).

There are actually persons in these sleeping bags, but you can't see anyone's head as they're totally covered, with only a small opening for their mouth

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CAUTION

Unlike a summer trip to California or Australia, you don't just head out in this country in the winter without some serious planning and the right gear. The area described is around 62° latitude – similar to Anchorage, Alaska. The temperature can easily drop by 20 °C (36 °F) overnight, and winter temperatures can get as low as -40 °C (-40 °F). Daylight hours are a lot shorter here, too. This country has some serious hazards, and safety must be the highest priority. Good, reliable gear is needed, far more than the latest ultra-light tarp and alky stove. Taking risks with inadequate clothing, food, or other gear is not acceptable, and while there may be plenty of room for slight errors of judgment mid-summer in some countries, the same does NOT apply in a Finnish winter!

Even so, the gear we used is far lighter than the "traditional" gear used in this region. Finland does have some advantages in wintertime: it is fairly flat, and there are vast open regions. Putting your gear on sleds, or pulks, really takes the weight off your shoulders and makes balance and travel easier and safer. When you have a pulk, the emphasis on pack weight drops, which helps let safety predominate.

and nose. However, using two lesser-quality bags is another option. If one of them is a down bag, use that as the inner bag and put a larger synthetic bag over the outside. If it's really cold, you might keep your beanie on and maybe your down jacket, too!

Beware of self-inflating mats, as these can let you down in the extreme cold. All of the members of this group (except me) have had them start to leak around the seams when taken out in less than -10 °C (14 °F). The PU coating goes stiff in the cold, and small amounts of hard ice accumulate inside the mat from your breath, which may also do some damage. The good foam mats are not really heavy and won't go flat with a puncture on unfinished pine beams either. We used Finnish ones called Tunturisusi; they are about fifteen millimeters thick.

Lightweight?

You might get the feeling that we're more like backwoodsmen than lightweight backpackers, and to some extent, that's true. However, modern technology has helped substantially in reducing the weight of the gear that is essential to carry. You see, where I come from (Queensland, Australia), you can go walking with nothing much more than a pair of sandals (and you often don't really need those, either). Before the English colonized Australia, the Australian Aborigines lived their entire lives as ultra-light trekkers. The term FSO, or "from skin out," takes on a real meaning for them.

But the environmental conditions in the two countries are quite different, and no matter what you think, it is

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It's surprising how much you can have in a pulk. This one looks like there's someone in it.

the environment that will dictate what constitutes the bare minimum in gear. People might argue around the edges, saving perhaps a kilogram here and there, but if the environment can kill you – and trust me, the winter snow in northern regions can – then why take the risks? Just put it in the sled.

Compared to some pulks you might have seen in other places, the ones common in this area are quite lightweight. Ours was a homemade copy of the style used by the company Fjellpulken. Weighing only five kilograms and measuring 120 by 43 centimeters, they really are lightweight compared to what the woodsmen used years ago. By way of comparison, my old Karrimor pack weighs four kilograms empty. The modern pulk is not much more than a thin base with a waterproof cloth covering and some poles, yet it can help you to carry 50 kilograms or up to 180 liters of gear with little effort.

Skis and Boots

If you've skied a bit in other countries, you might find that you've got gear that is not suitable to the climate or the snow conditions found here in Finland. The snow is not hard driven against the sides of the mountains, so it is often quite soft. You might find yourself sinking ten or twenty centimeters with each step, making the choice of skis, boots, and bindings a little different.

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Common Nokian ski boots, felt liners, and cable bindings.

Starting with boots, there are a number of choices here for erä skiing:

- Rubber boots
- Telemark-style boots
- Hiking-style boots

What type of boot you choose will depend on the ski and bindings you have, as well as what you like. Whatever you choose should have the ability to use felt boot liners to allow you to change them out and dry them. Wet feet, sooner or later, mean cold feet – or worse.

I currently use the Nokian boots with exchangeable felt liners, although there are many other brands which are also suited to erä skiing. They look a bit like farmyard "gum boots," but the sole is tougher where the toe mounts to the ski, for a start. Most everyone here uses them, and perhaps they are all that's needed. Since these are higher than ordinary hiking boots, it's unlikely you'll get any snow inside them. The common arrangement usually has your waterproof shell pants outside the boots as well.

With the changeable felt liners, you can put on warm, dry liners when you've gotten into camp. Swapping them often and drying them in the hut means you can keep your feet warm and dry. I also found that putting the felt liners over my woolen socks meant it was not such a shock to the system to put on cold boots in the mornings. By the way, wool is the key word here – not cotton! I shouldn't need to say this, but if you're going back-

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country skiing in winter in Finland, do not wear anything made of cotton.

My skis are older wooden skis of some 1970s vintage, used without skins. The wooden skis are a little heavier than the modern plastic base forest skis, but I personally prefer them for this kind of work, as I find they give a better grip than the plastic-surfaced skis do without skins, and at the same time they have a better glide than plastic-surfaced skis with skins, so I don't need to wrestle with skins all day.

The bindings are the typical Finnish style and very similar to the old Kandahar bindings used in Europe in the 1950s. The spring around the back holds the toe into the wedge-shaped binding quite securely, yet gives you comfort to move. Both the boots and bindings are essentially the same as what the Finnish Army uses, which means both are "Private-proof."

Neither my skis nor the other typical forest skis have metal edges or substantial side cuts. Modern boots and skis seem to have become more like downhill skis every year, which perhaps reflects the bulk of the market. For back-country skiing, the reality is that if you're not on icy or wind-packed hard snow, then the steel edges will be of little benefit. Without substantial downhill work, there is little benefit in deep side cuts, metal edges, or the rigid bindings and boot.

Most of the hunters and outdoorsmen here use these "rubber boots" and the same bindings as the rest of our party was using. Tourists in Lapland may use different (more fashionable) skis, but the Nokia "Rokka" boots with these bindings on 2.5 meter skis (called forest skis) are really common among people who are outdoors all the time: border guards, National Park rangers, power linesmen, and so on. The bindings have the advantage that you can wear the same boots to ski in as you do around camp. Also, it's almost impossible to have them become inoperable due to clogging with snow, which can happen with other bindings.

Two of my partners were using Finnish Jarvinen brand skis with plastic versions of the same ski side binding as mine. On the other hand Lari, the "Hi Tek" fella in the group, was wearing Åsnes Combi Combat Cap skis (with Kortfell nylon skins when towing the sled) with Rotefella Riva III bindings and Garmont Excursion boots with the G-fit liners. While not water-tight, they do keep your feet well protected from the cold.

Having a team with fewer sleds than people means that someone can lead who isn't towing a sled. As well as picking the better paths (being able to back up more easily) this also helps to pack the snow for the ones pulling the sleds. However, with the shorter narrower Åsnes skis, Lari was still sinking into the snow in some areas, and he needed skins to get enough grip to tow a pulk. Anita, who was using the Finnish forest-type skis, seemed to manage pulling the sled fine with no skins on her skis.

A Canadian friend of mine has commented that in their conditions, the rubber boots are easily torn. As it happens, I'm waiting to field test some

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Winter is the best time to visit the wetlands of Finland – no mosquitoes!

new "Asolo" backcountry boots that take the New Nordic Norm Bindings. These boots have a ski mounting and binding which looks exactly like my track skis, but at forty-three millimeters, they are substantially wider than my track ski boot bindings, which are only twenty-five millimeters. However, these bindings will be at their rated "torque" or "width of ski" limits when mounted on my wooden skis (well, actually, my skis are ten millimeters wider than the rating), so we'll see if that causes any problems.

I'm hoping that the greater torque strength of these new boots and bindings will have some benefits in controlling my skis on slopes. The boots should allow easy walking (unlike modern Telemark boots), but they might clog with snow when I go to get back onto my skis – my track ski boots certainly do. The size of these new boots will allow me to have changeable felt liners just like with the "gum boots," but in deeper snow, I'll probably need gaiters to keep snow from getting where I don't want it.

Other Gear

There are some items that you don't really want to go without in this country, even though you can. For example, we carried a small hatchet for cutting firewood and a light alloy and plastic snow shovel, just in case. We also had at

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Mikko considering trying to climb the tree and ski down the slope. We all thought this was a good idea, and I even put the camera into movie mode. It wasn't until he noticed our anticipation of entertainment that he began to consider safety issues. He didn't go any further than shown, calling us "vultures," or something like that...

least one Leatherman tool on the belt and a couple of meters of thin gauge stainless wire, for repairs.

Conclusion

So, with all the right gear, knowing what the climate might throw at you, and your route planned out, you can set off for a few days away from it all. You'll be safe and warm with just you and the scenery ahead of you, ensuring you'll have as good a time as we did.

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Deep in the jungles of the Na Pali Coast, the Kalalau Trail is the definition of tropical. Agnes Stowe takes a break on our three-day hike.

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Tropical Ultra-Light

Hawaiian trails are perfect for going light

by Matt Hage and Agnes Stowe

November in the Hawaiian Islands is a backpacker's paradise: daytime temps in the seventies, enough rain to get creeks flowing, and still ample daylight. It's also a bit slow before the holiday travel season, with less competition for permits and reasonably priced lodging. Assignment work had Agnes and me in the Islands for most of November 2007, and we planned to squeeze in a couple short backpacking trips between shoots. With our luggage nearly maxed out with photo and computer equipment, packing a lightweight trekking kit was essential. But hey, this is the tropics! What more do you need?

We were to spend the first part of the month on the Big Island (Hawaii) where most of the trails are concentrated in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. This is the realm of Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of fire, and the Island's southern landscape is charred from constant eruptions. Vast crevasses spew sulphuric gasses, and giant calderas sit as open wounds to the earth with molten lava flowing just beneath their blackened scabs. Rangers are only too happy to tell terrifying tales of "expert" backcountry travelers who broke through thin rock shelves or stepped into bottomless fumaroles[1] that had been obscured by vegetation. Our plan was to let the Puna Coast Trail lead us out into the vast wasteland of ʻaʻa[2] lava. First we would camp at Halape (eleven miles), before ex-

Notes

1. fumarole: opening in the Earth's crust
2. `a`a: Hawaiian term for lava flows that have a rough, rubbly surface composed of broken lava blocks

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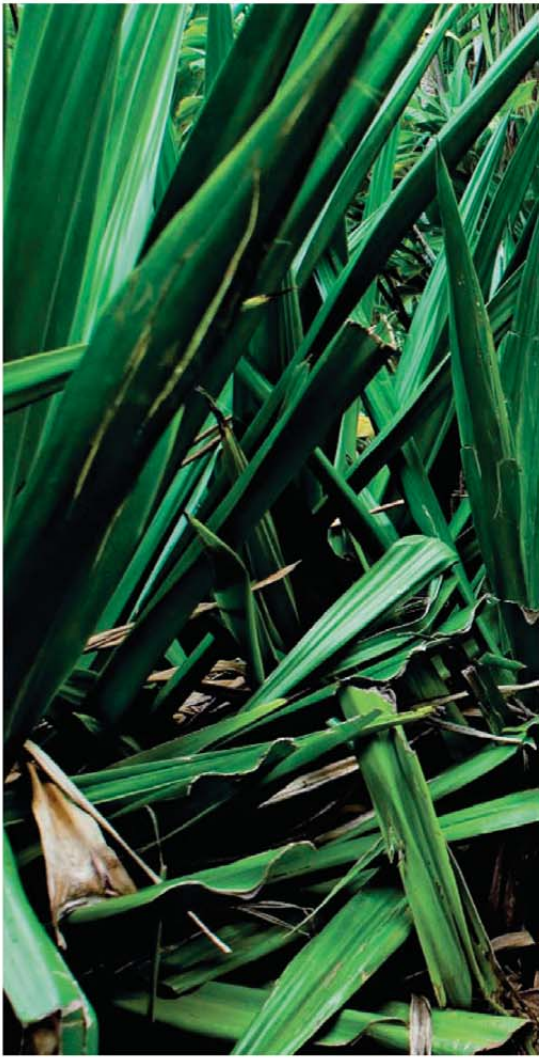
ploring other approved backcountry sites such as Ka'aha and Pepeiao. All have rain catchment systems that provide the only drinkable water on the trail network (very important!). However, within a half hour on the trail, we were both hacking like a couple of chain smokers. Luck would have it that a change in the winds brought inland the noxious volcanic gasses, which are usually blown out to sea. These conditions persisted for the next couple days.

We spent the second half of November on the lush island of Kauai, where we fit in a three-day trek of the famed Na Pali Coast. The eleven-mile Kalalau Trail hugs dramatic sea cliffs like ancient scaffolding with some sections measuring a mere foot in width. Hundreds of feet below, waves from the Pacific Ocean crash constantly, and bomb-bay door-style views are available in a couple sections. The trail is rugged, with many switchbacks and climbs out of the valleys. Feral goats and pigs inhabit the dense tropical forests along this coast, giving hikers a couple of surprised traffic jams en route to Kalalau Beach; it is a true paradise. Camps are set back in the trees, just a few feet off the perfect orange sand beach. A thin cascade is the water source on the cliff hemming in the beach. Though the hike in was very hot by our standards (we're from Alaska), we did find plenty of shade and water. Weather moved in on our last night, with high winds and rain. Unprepared at the moment, we had to rearrange our small SilTarp just hours before sunrise. Things got a little wet, but with the morning air sitting at a comfortable seventy degrees, it was a minor inconvenience. This is the perfect trail for going light!



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Sections of the Kalalau Trail along Kauai's Na Pali Coast are the very definition of tropical forest. Agnes tries to avoid the sharp-pointed leaves on her way to Kalalau Beach.

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Agnes Stowe takes in the rugged Na Pali Coast of Kauai's Northwest shore. The Kalalau Trail carves a scaffold-like trek along this coast.

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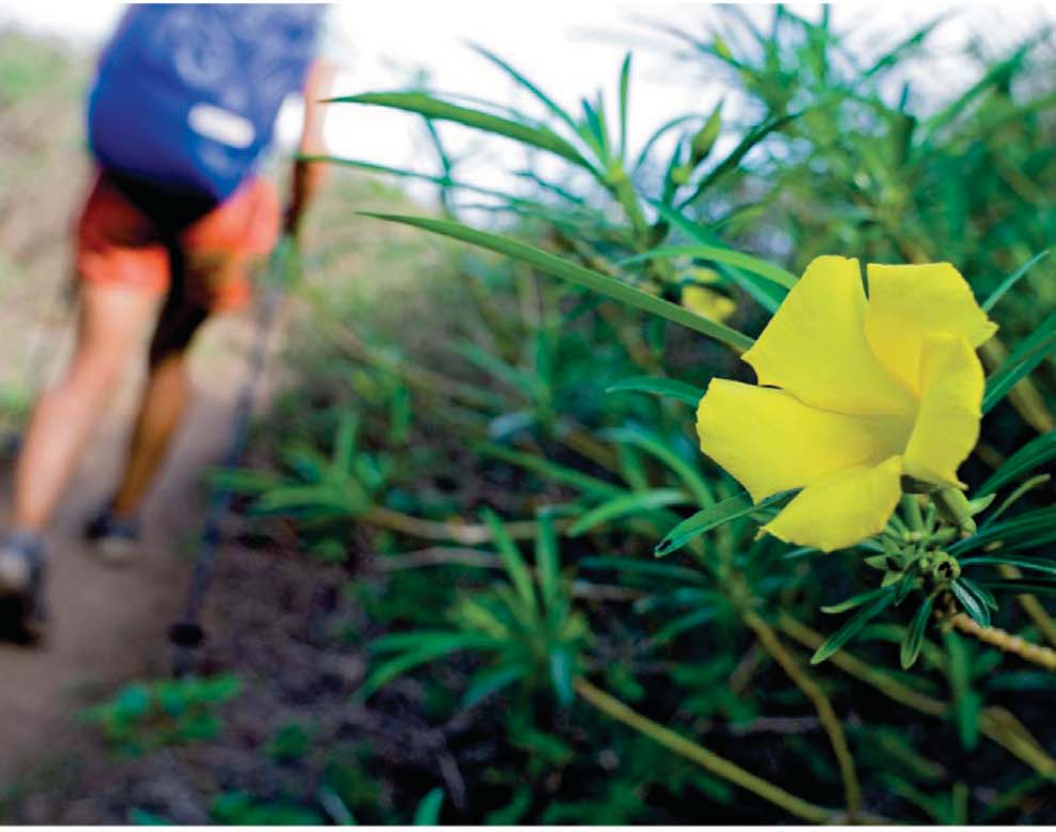

Yellow oleander flowers hem in the trail near Kalalau Beach at the end of our trek along the Na Pali Coast. The plant (Nerium oleander) is said to ease deeply buried emotional problems. The same could be said of a week on the island of Kauai.

FACING: A small waterfall acts as the water source and rinsing area for those camping at Kalalau Beach. Agnes Stowe takes a rinse after our hike in to the beach.

CAMERA KIT FOR HAWAII

• Nikon E8400 w/ battery	16.5 oz
• Spare battery	2.5 oz
• CF card x2	1.0 oz
• Ultrapod	1.5 oz
Total for kit	21.5 oz

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Agnes enters "Crawler's Corner," the psychological crux of the eleven-mile Kalalau Trail on the Na Pali Coast of Kauai.

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Agnes wakes to a mist-shrouded forest in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. A change in the winds brought in toxic volcanic gasses that quickly put an end to our trek on the Big Island.

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TOP: Our two night stay at Kalalau Beach comes to an end, and Agnes leads the charge back to the surf town of Hanalei Bay.

BOTTOM: Agnes preps an after-dinner hot drink while at camp on the Kalalau Beach. Though our Mini Bull Designs Sith stove is plenty powerful, it doesn't take much fuel to boil water on a sixty-degree night at sea level.

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In Bulgaria, the peace walkers found themselves trekking a Roman Road, the *Via Militaris*, that's over one thousand years old. Photo by Émile.

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In the Steps of Romans, Pilgrims, and Templars

A 2600-Mile Light Trek to Jerusalem

By Brandon Wilson

It's often said, "Be careful what you wish for – you just might get it." Well, little could I imagine six years ago when the idea of walking to Jerusalem first entered my addled brain that I'd find myself actually attempting that trek.

It all began innocently enough. I'd backpacked through nearly one hundred countries, but after checking the "must-sees" off my list, I was looking for something more... challenging... intense... satisfying. Well, a thousand kilometer trek across Tibet in 1992 with my wife Cheryl allowed me to glimpse the possibilities outside the usual traveler's box.

While exploring the remote Himalayan countryside and turmoil in the oppressed Land of Snows, we discovered personal, global, and philosophical answers. We encountered extreme physical challenges. After forty days of pushing our bodies and minds to the limits, at altitudes up to 17,000 feet through blizzards and dodging bullets, my wife and I actually survived. Staying with families along the path, we absorbed Tibet's nuances one step at a time. We talked with weary monks over far too many cups of yak butter tea. As they revealed their faith in the Dalai Lama's return, I rediscovered my own faith. Between cups, we found time to marvel at nature with childlike wide-eyed wonder. Plus, we enjoyed the meditative solitude and chance to disconnect from the frenzy of the outside world, if only for a little while.

Most importantly, for me it emphasized the necessity of traveling lightly on the trail – and in life – as walking became transcendental, "a trampoline for the mind." Unfortunately, it ended all too soon, but not before I'd become an addict. For years, I longed again for the pleasure of the trail.

Finally, in 1999, I decided to drop everything to follow my restless wanderlust. That fall, my wife and I set off trekking across Spain for 500 miles on the

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famous Camino de Santiago. Surprisingly, it brought back a rush of satisfaction on many levels and made me wonder why I'd waited so long. Plus, it forced me to reconsider how much I'd packed for the thirty-day trek, as I whittled my load from twenty-two pounds down to a mere fifteen.

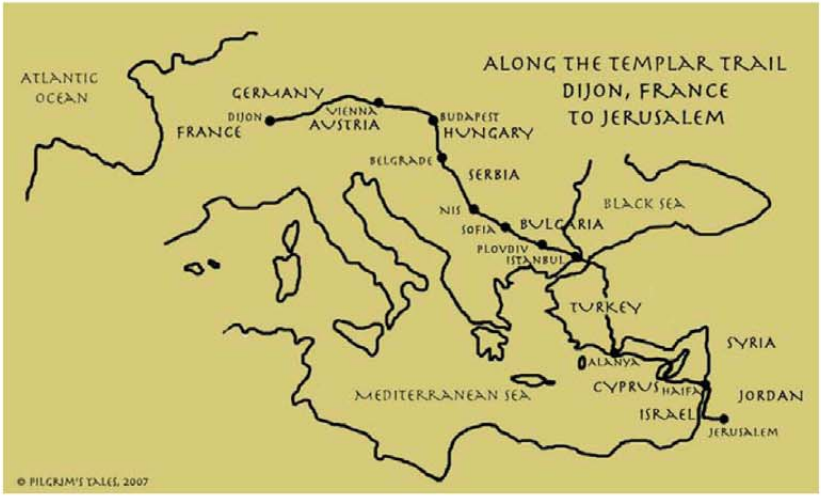
Each day, after walking alone or in a small group, we'd run into the same folks at the albergues and share laughs over a bottle of wine. Call it fate, but I kept encountering one fellow in his sixties. Émile was a likable Frenchman with a bushy white beard and amused blue eyes. One day he shared his plan to walk with his wife from his home in Dijon to Jerusalem, some 4,500 kilometers. Although I admired his fantasy, people's dreams and realities seldom meet. We managed to stay in touch over the next five years as I continued to walk historic long distance trails, including the St. Olav's Way across Norway and the 1,100 mile Via Francigena from Canterbury, England to Rome. My wife and I even managed to trek the Camino together again in 2005.

Imagine my surprise one morning when out of the blue I heard from ol' Émile. "My wife is unable to trek to Jerusalem as we'd planned. Would you like to come along?"

It certainly took me by surprise, but what could I say, other than, "Of course!"

It was already December, and he planned to leave in April. Although I offered my assistance, he'd already chosen the route and rough stages along the

On their quest from France to Jerusalem, Brandon and Émile planned to follow the route of the First Crusades and those who were to later become the first Knights Templar. Map by Brandon Wilson.



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4200-kilometer trail, as he'd been planning the journey for six years. Our path would loosely follow that of the old Roman way that was later trekked by Crusaders, pilgrims, and Templars on their way to Jerusalem. It would take us across two continents and twelve countries. Then as now, the trail was fraught with uncertainties. We might not have to face wolves, roadside bandits, brigands, and Moors, but we had our own challenges. A thousand years ago, people often traveled together for safety and support. Escorting pilgrims safely to Jerusalem was one of the original duties of the Knights Templar. However, we would be on our own, unsupported for up to seven months.

Next there were the packing challenges. How could I carry fifteen pounds and still be prepared for temperatures ranging from near freezing in Germany to brutal one hundred-degree days in Turkey's Anatolia? Since we were traveling light, we'd walk without a tent and would rely on finding safe, affordable accommodation every night. At times, given the distance between villages, this might force us to walk nearly sixty kilometers a day in Turkey. Plus, on a modest peregrino (pilgrim) budget of just thirty dollars each per day. We'd have to hone our negotiating skills – and rely on the kindness of strangers.

Then, of course, there were the language challenges. We could do well in English, French, and a smattering of German, but what about Serbian? Bulgarian? Turkish? Arabic?

Although the first part of our way would follow the bicycle path along the Danube River, after reaching Budapest we'd be on our own to find other trails or small roads (to avoid ending up as road-kill along the trucking trail to the Middle East). Speaking of which, as usual, the region was rife with tension. Would we be allowed to walk through Syria, a member of my government's proclaimed "Axis of Evil?" I was unable to get a Syrian visa in advance, since they were only issued for six months, and their Turkish consulate recently stopped providing them to Americans.

There were all these logistical questions – and more. Just as important were the physical and mental challenges: Could our bodies survive walking a distance equivalent to crossing North America? Could we walk the daily equivalent of a marathon – and have the mental stamina to do it again day after day? Only time would tell. As for me, although I liked to explore options in advance, I'd learned not to over-obsess to the point of talking yourself out of another adventure. Besides, in Tibet I'd learned that you just have to have faith when you approach an odyssey like this and realize that the universe will provide.

Personal challenges aside, in these times of escalating wars and increased suspicions, I chose to trek this trail for an additional reason. I wanted it to be a trek for peace along a path once associated with war. I wanted to talk with others about choosing peaceful methods to settle our differences. From past experience I knew that once people walk

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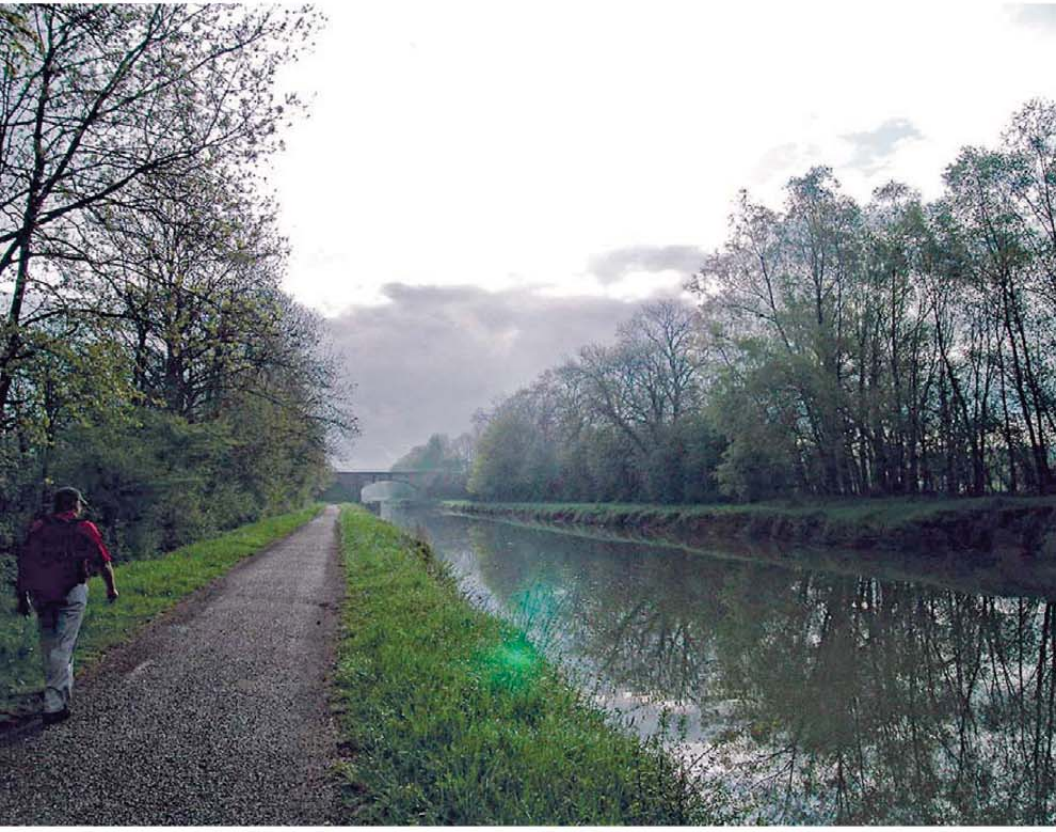
Brandon and Émile began their 2620-mile journey by tracing the tranquil canals of eastern France. Photo by Brandon Wilson.



a trail together, share food and wine around a table, and learn more about each other's lives, we realize that our needs are not all that different. Although our cultures and religions vary, we all want about the same things for our families. Once you peel away the fear and paranoia, it becomes much harder to harbor violence against another. So this became my quest – to pioneer this pathway so that it might ultimately become a trail for peace for others in the future.

Finally, before setting off it was essential to tweak my gear to make it as lightweight and flexible as possible. I chose a lightweight ultra-marathon shoe, rather than boots more appropriate for the Appalachian Trail. Montrail, now part of Columbia, supplied water repellent Susitnas for the first rainy months. I'd switch after Linz, Austria into their Continental Divides with a breathable web top for the sizzling road portions. LEKI US donated lightweight

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Nordic poles similar to what they'd supplied for my cross-Norway hike. Then I got a pro deal from GoLite to add some clothing to one of their backpacks, weighing just twenty-two ounces. The rest of my gear was basic. I'd take a Polarguard vest, Capilene shirt, and Gore-Tex rain shell and pants for layering. I'd send these home with my wife after we met in Budapest and switch into hot weather gear: shorts and two breathable nylon t-shirts. I'd carry just a sleep sheet. Otherwise, I'd bring a first aid kit designed for possible foot problems, a compact digital camera, journal, synthetic camp towel, MagLite, compass, a concentrated energy drink, and a few odds and ends that brought my total pack weight in at about fifteen pounds. I'd pick up any food and liquid I needed along the way.

April twenty-third arrived all too quickly and after a going-away party for us in Dijon, we set off. Our trek began along the canals of France, paths once used by mules pulling barges from village to town. Even from the start, we hit a reasonably quick pace, averaging about thirty kilometers a day. Although both experienced walkers, Émile and I were not exactly "joined at the hip" and each set our own pace. I took the lead until reaching an intersection where I stopped long enough for him to catch up, since his gear was best suited for shorter distances on rugged terrain. His pack was twice my size and his boots were heavy leather, so he worked all that much harder each day to keep up.

As anticipated, the weather in France and western Germany dogged us with numbing rain, then snow through the Black Forest. Then, more frequent showers had us donning rain gear several times a day, keeping us on our toes. As always, improvisation was key.

It's ironic. You take journeys to break routine – only to find that you've replaced old routines with new ones before you know it. After spending a night in a local "privat zimmer" or guesthouse, we'd have a hearty Bavarian breakfast, then head back to the trail by 6:30 or 7:00 am. We'd stop to warm up at 10:00 and stop again for lunch at noon. Averaging between four and five kilometers an hour, we'd try to arrive in a village large enough to have accommodations by 2:00 pm. We were more successful on some days than others.

Although the canals took us through some beautiful areas, we were relieved to finally arrive in Donaueschingen, Germany – the source of the Danube River. The Donauradweg, or Danube bicycle path, is an enviable example of what countries can do to promote fitness and outdoor sports. Well maintained, mostly flat, and well marked, it spans a total of 1,367 kilometers along the Danube Valley through four countries all the way to Budapest. Even though I'd brought a Cicerone guide to the trail, we also bought local cyclist guides, helpful especially for finding villages with "zimmer frei" or private rooms.

Fortunately, for as busy as it might have been, we were alone on the trail most

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of the time. Cyclists, inline skaters and joggers were (sensibly) inside, out of the frigid rain. We continued to walk undeterred six to eight hours each day, slogging through rain for eighteen out of twenty-one days in Austria. However, it wasn't all torture.

We savored the local cuisine. Émile worked his way through variations on tripe, his favorite dish, while I discovered that nothing could warm you up quite like Swabian sauerbraten with red gravy, kraut, and spätzle. Usually, it was all topped off with a delicious local white wine, pear schnapps, or Dunkel Hefeweizen, a dark, unfiltered wheat brew that's a meal in itself.

Despite differences in nationalities, culture, and religion, "angels" frequently helped the pilgrims on their peace walk. Photo by Brandon Wilson.

We also explored sites along the way, taking about one day in ten off to rest. It was a movable feast from the baroque grandeur of timeless cities like Regensburg with Walhalla, its Grecian-like temple dedicated to Teutonic prowess, to the serene monasteries of Weltenburg; from the shocking concentration camps of Mauthausen to the crown jewels of Linz, Vienna, and Bratislava. Life was different every day, unpredictable and unforgettable.

Even from the start, we met people along the path whom we called "angels." Spotting us wet, famished, or bedraggled, they'd invite us into their homes for a bowl of lentil soup or bottle of wine. After learning we were "pilgrims," sometimes they'd offer us a free or discounted room, or maybe direct us to the right path at a critical junction in the trail. Some days, it was almost too easy. However, soon all that would change.

Once outside of Budapest, we became true pioneers. The "radweg" ended. In Serbia, our sleek bicycle path deteriorated into badly maintained two-lane roads littered with memorials to those who'd passed away in the process of getting from there to here. One day I counted twenty, just in a morning. It be-

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Europe's serene back roads transport you to a far simpler time. Photo by Brandon Wilson.

came harder to find food (although beer was more plentiful). Each night we had to search longer for a place to stay and then negotiate harder for a "local" price, versus the higher non-Eastern one.

To make life even more difficult, midsummer temperatures soared to eighty, then ninety degrees. Although we attempted to stay along the Danube River, in Hungary the paths swarmed with mosquitoes. If we stopped longer than twenty seconds, we'd be covered in a black, itchy blanket. Then there was the humidity so thick that we'd be drenched in sweat by 9:00 am and remain that way until well after sundown. Soon we were eager to head into the hills and make do with a little more climbing.

Still, even in countries as poor as Serbia and Bulgaria, we were aided by folks nearly every day. After finding someone who spoke English, I was even able to chat more with them about our peace trek. Invariably their response was warm

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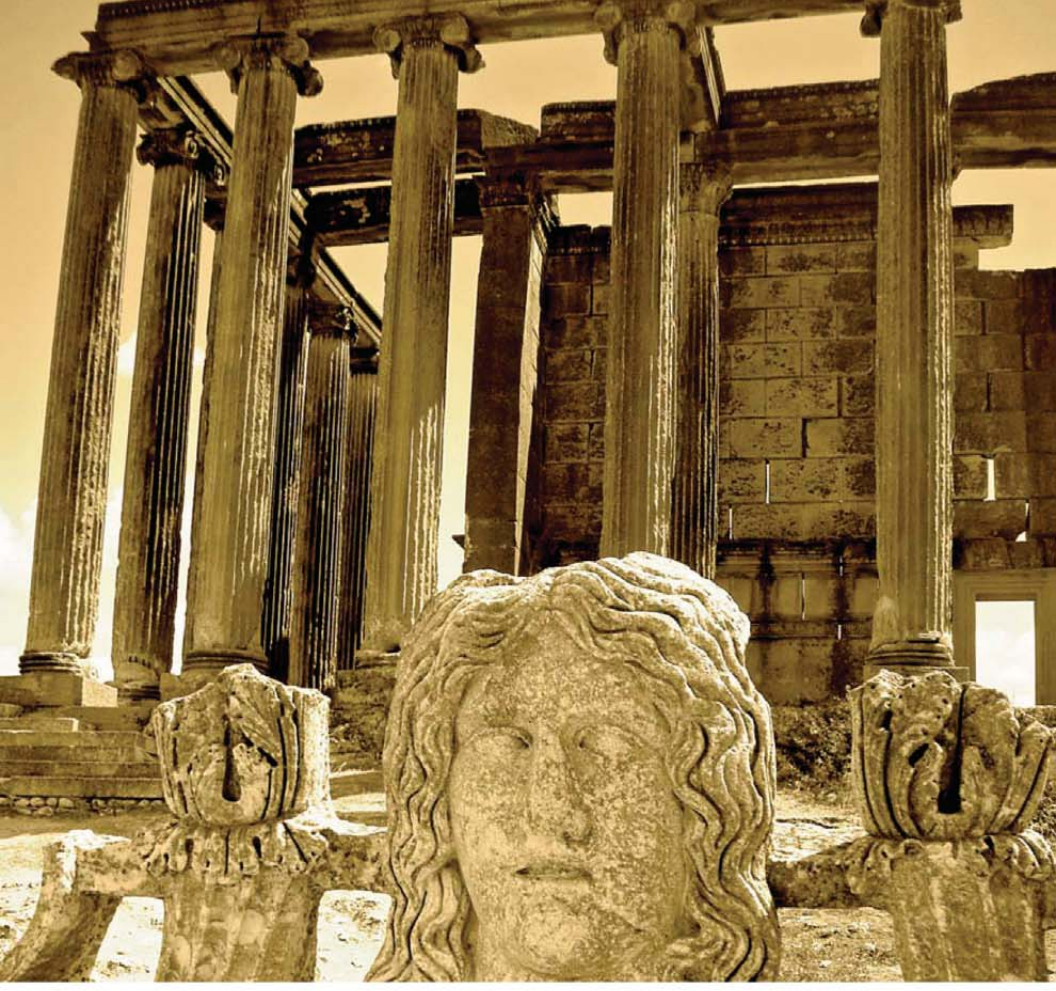

The Templar Trail is rife with beauty, history, and culture, such as that experienced at this ancient Temple to Zeus in Aizanoi, Turkey. Photo by Brandon Wilson.

and often emotional, as they've suffered from wars for centuries. Not surprisingly, we were asked to do newspaper or television interviews in the larger cities, reaching millions with a message of peace.

Upon reaching Belgrade, it was an ironic shock to learn that Israel and Lebanon were again bombing each other. Some news pundits speculated that it was the beginning of World War III. Although we promised to re-evaluate our route when we reached Istanbul, for me the writing was already on the wall. To risk it all and walk through a war zone seemed reckless, even for me. It ran contrary to my belief that adventurers take extra time to make good plans and smart decisions – so they can live to tell the tale, right?

By the time we reached Bulgaria, the sweltering weather and fatigue were

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Jerusalem, a place held sacred by three religions, remains a troubled city living in fear and on borrowed time. Photo by Brandon Wilson.

clearly taking their toll on Émile. He was ready to stop by noon, was dehydrating and becoming more disoriented. Yet I knew the hardest part of the journey remained – crossing Turkey. By the time we reached the new Constantinople, Émile regrettably decided to return home. It was his choice, and I didn't try to talk him out of it. He had given it his best. Considering his earlier walk from Dijon to Finisterre, he had now walked the width of Europe – an impressive accomplishment for a man sixty-eight years old.

As for me, after a few days rest, I continued alone across the high, barren plains of Turkey. With the possibility of war spreading to Syria, I decided to head directly south to Alanya on the coast, steering clear of a new Ebola-type virus infecting parts of Anatolia. This route also coincided with the Crusader trail to Cyprus and then on to what was once Palestine. I was initially uneasy

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about folks' reaction to an American trekking through a Muslim region, since our government's policies are strongly criticized throughout the world these days. However, once we had a chance to talk over çay, or sweet tea, the Turks were surprisingly hospitable. Hardly a day passed that I wasn't taken under someone's wing and welcomed. Alanya's television station even insisted on shooting an interview before I caught the quick ferry to northern Cyprus.

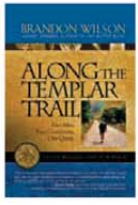
This option "B," as I called it, was never absolutely guaranteed. The notorious Green Line had only recently opened for travelers between the north and south of partitioned Cyprus, so I was relieved to cross without a problem. Trekking another three days along country roads through sleepy mountain villages, I arrived in Limassol, a city once captured by Richard the Lionheart on the island's southern coast. Hopping the weekly cargo ship, I made the overnight crossing to the recently shelled port of Haifa, Israel.

Fortunately while in Turkey, I'd learned about the new Israel National Trail transecting the country and had a chance to meet its founder in Haifa. Dany was very generous with his time, supplying me with topographic maps and a list of "angels" to assist along that final stretch to Jerusalem. This path was a welcome change, as it took me off-road into the rugged hills, then along the beach to Tel Aviv, and finally southeast toward Jerusalem.

Although the country was in a state of high alert, my hosts were inquisitive and equally generous, giving me a rare glimpse at modern Israeli life. They were a varied cast of characters: from the freewheeling young couple living in their van to the war-hardened Army colonel; from the chicken farming couple to the lady with kids living on a kibbutz. Once again, I discovered that people are similar, no matter their country, culture, or religion.

Finally on September 29, 2006, after trekking 160 days over 4,217 kilometers (2,600 miles), I entered through celebrated Jaffa Gate into the Old City of Jerusalem. There was no fanfare and no welcoming committee... only a solitary peace pilgrim entering a city held sacred by three major religions; a trekker grateful to all those who helped him realize another "impossible" dream.

If anything was accomplished beyond personal fulfillment, I only hope that I planted some seeds along the trail. Perhaps they will take root and this will someday become a true international path for peace that all may walk "light" in brotherhood. Ready to join me?



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The Good Life

There is something to be said about falling asleep, wearing your pack (and your favorite hat), on a well-worn trail after a long day of walking. Chase Jordan, age ten, refines technique on the South Fork Spanish Creek Trail, Lee Metcalf Wilderness, Montana (June 2008).
Photo by Ryan Jordan (Sigma DP1 f/4.5 1/30s).

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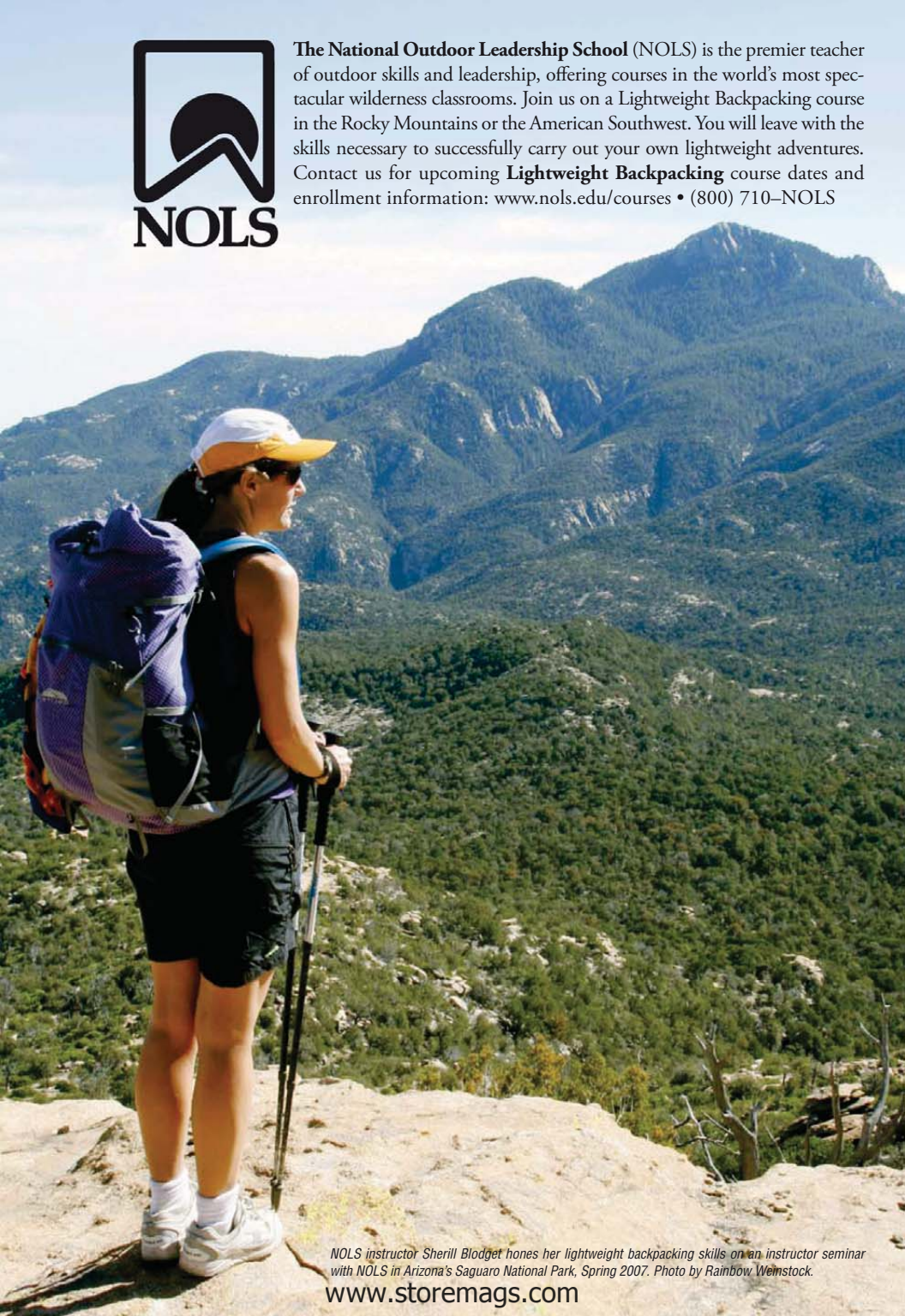

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NOLS instructor Sherill Blodget hones her lightweight backpacking skills on an instructor seminar with NOLS in Arizona's Saguaro National Park, Spring 2007. Photo by Rainbow Weinstock.

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